

# *The Religious Side of Victorian Bath, 1830-1870*

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In recent years the individual cities and towns of Victorian England have received the special attention of a growing number of historians. Improbable though it may seem, however, little concentrated work has been done on the course of religious developments in individual communities in this period.<sup>1</sup> The charting through time of the relationship between the social structure of a particular community and such a vital force as religion is of obvious importance to the historian. The purpose of this article is to do just that for the city of Bath.

It is therefore hoped that this article might help to direct the attention of more historians to the specific study of the relationship between secular society and religion in the wide range of urban areas in nineteenth century England. As in the case of Bath, the results of such studies could be very useful for our understanding of all aspects of social, urban, religious and political history at the local level.

This author recognizes that the relationship between religious life and secular society in Bath as in other parts of Victorian England will require even more research in the future. New methodological approaches and research tools (even some yet unknown forms of quantitative analysis) may well be developed by social historians. For the present, however, this article should serve as a means of introducing some of the more important questions concerning the interaction of religious developments, social structure and secular developments within a specific community.<sup>2</sup>

The choice of Bath as a setting for this study was partially influenced by the fact that surprisingly little interest has been shown by historians in

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<sup>1</sup> Three works stand out as pioneering studies of religious developments in specific locales: Allan BROCKETTE, *Nonconformity in Exeter, 1650-1875* (Manchester, 1962); R. B. WALKER, "Religious Changes in Liverpool in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (October, 1968), and E. R. WICKHAM, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the original preparation of this article little inspiration could be found for this area of investigation in current English historiography. I therefore looked to some outstanding American studies as possible prototypes for historical studies of the relationship between society and religion in general. Among these were Timothy SMITH, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York, 1957); Liston POPE, *Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven, 1942); Henry MAY, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York, 1949), and Whitney CROSS, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York, 1950). Since that time Professor W. R. WARD's *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (London, 1972) has appeared as a full scale attempt to deal with this question for England as a whole.

the "Queen of the West" in the Victorian Age. In fact, R. S. Neale<sup>3</sup> is the only recent professional historian to publish much on Bath in the period after the Napoleonic Wars. This article therefore may also help to bring the city more to the attention of Victorian scholars in particular.

Part of the reason for a certain lack of interest in Victorian Bath is undoubtedly its seeming insignificance in the nation when compared with its status in the previous century. Historians who view English history from the standpoint of what the influential were doing completely lose interest in the city after the Napoleonic Wars. By that time Bath's upper class amusements were fast disappearing and with them the involvement of the nation's most important people. No longer were statesmen, poets and trend-setters in fashion to be seen within its boundaries. Bath really became just a provincial town in the nineteenth century.

To admit that Victorian Bath is less important to the historian of the influential, however, is by no means to say that it is a barren field of investigation for other sorts of historians — especially social historians. In the early nineteenth century Bath society began to develop more on its own independent and distinctive lines with less guidance from London society. Bathonians were left more to their own resources than ever before and the new directions in which their society moved were perhaps more interesting than ever before. In point of fact Victorian Bath might well prove to be a better society for all sorts of historical investigation than the way the city was in its eighteenth century splendour.<sup>4</sup>

This was especially true in the case of religious developments. Many contemporaries and some more recent writers contend that religion was at the root of the evolution of the society of Victorian Bath, a society so different from its eighteenth century predecessor. Moreover, Methodist and Evangelical Revivals were believed to have transformed the moral life of the community converting Bath from a city of sin to one of piety.<sup>5</sup> Contemporaries believed the transformation was truly enormous in its consequences.

<sup>3</sup> R. S. NEALE, *Class and Ideology in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1972), Chapter II; "The Standard of Living, 1780-1844: A Regional and Class Study," *Economic History Review*, 2nd series (December 1966), and "The Industries of the City of Bath in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society Proceedings*, CVIII (1964). Useful also is his "Economic Conditions and Working Class Movements in the City of Bath, 1800-1850" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Bristol, 1963). This article relies heavily on the thorough work done by Professor Neale on the social structure of nineteenth century Bath.

<sup>4</sup> This was recognized in effect even by many nineteenth century writers. See John EARLE, *A Guide to the Knowledge of Bath, Ancient and Modern* (Bath, 1864). According to Earle, the history of eighteenth century Bath could "hardly be altogether regarded as provincial — it becomes the arena of all that is most conspicuous and most highly organized in national life" (p. 166). It is interesting that it was obvious to at least some contemporary historians.

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly apparent in the Chapel pamphlets of the period, e.g. Philip CARTER, *Memoirs of the Life and Character of Rev. John Paul Porter* (Bath, 1834).

One of the most serious of the alleged consequences was that the new religious activity destroyed the basis of the old city's economic prosperity — the public and private amusements of the wealthy. Banquets, the races, opera, theatre, mixed bathing were all clearly on the wane by 1815. Two decades later the city was one of the nation's evangelical showplaces. The changes were very visible. Even as factually descriptive a guidebook as *Knight's Excursion Companion* confidently stated (after noting the disappearance of pornographic literature from the book stores) in 1851 "...without being too pharisaical, the city might compare her present with her past moral condition with some complacency."<sup>6</sup>

David Jeremy<sup>7</sup> has suggested reasons apart from revitalized religion for the decline in public amusements from the late eighteenth century. One of these reasons was certainly the changing social structure of the city through the entire eighteenth century. During that period prosperous clothiers, farmers, retired army and naval officers, absentee and retired clergymen established a permanent "middle class" group within the city. People engaged in the service industries from bakers to jewellers came in as well to cater to the resident middle classes as well as the upper class, more aristocratic tourists — expanding the population ten-fold in the process.

As Jeremy has pointed out, the tastes of the new middle class residents frequently clashed with those of the upper class tourists, forcing the tourists to seek private rather than public, communal amusements. In the short run, especially during the Napoleonic Wars, the upper classes developed a system of very select clubs designed to satisfy their needs. After 1815, however, high fashion tastes now led many tourists away from Bath to Brighton and other seaside resorts as well as to the newly opened Continent. By 1820 the aspiring, resident middle classes had also penetrated the city's exclusive clubs further encouraging the tourist exodus.

Jeremy's picture of declining tourist interest in Bath blends well with R. S. Neale's research on the city from roughly 1820 to 1840. According to Neale, Bath evolved into a multi-class provincial society in the early nineteenth century. The top layers were composed of wealthy and moderately wealthy permanent residents of the city. The lower layers mainly comprised the many people engaged in the task of supplying services to the wealthier residents. Neale disagrees quite forcefully with R. B. Pugh<sup>8</sup> and others asserting that, at least before 1840, the economy of Bath was far from "derelict" and that the slow disappearance of wealthy tourists had not yet made the city into a destitute haven for vagrants. Neale, however, does not deny the existence of some poor people, labouring or vagrant, in Bath society before mid-century.

<sup>6</sup> *Knight's Excursion Companion* (London, 1851), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> David J. JEREMY, "The Social Decline of Bath," *History Today*, XVII (April, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Professor R. B. PUGH, "Chartism in Somerset and Wiltshire," in Asa BRIGGS, ed., *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), pp. 174-219.

The evolution of Bath into a residential area in fact provided a good deal of profitable employment especially between 1820 and 1840. Independent artisans, small shopkeepers abounded in the city in the growth period — in particular in the parish of St. James (and to a lesser extent in Lyncombe and Widcombe). As late as 1851, thirty-six percent of the entire male population was engaged in the service industries.<sup>9</sup> There was also a large servant class found resident with their employers' families in such elegant parishes as Bathwick.<sup>10</sup> It was only after 1840 that Bath's economy and population levelled off. Thereafter a decline may be said to have gradually set in for tradesmen and artisans no longer flocked to the city seeking employment. No new families of property seemed to settle in Bath and this had a direct bearing on the service industries. The tradesmen, artisans and shopkeepers could no longer hope by mid-century for greater business but merely for what they already had. This had a depressing influence on the general working population of the city.

Although the role of religion in the emergence of a new Bath economy in the early nineteenth century is an area of debate, there can be little doubt about the place of religion in this new society. Just as the economy and class structure of this urban area was quite different from most large towns so was its religious behaviour. The religious census of 1851 given here reveals that Bath had one of the highest attendance figures for a large town in the country. Much of what has been written by K. S. Inglis, E. R. Wickham, Standish Meacham<sup>11</sup> and other historians on the failures of Victorian religion in urban areas would appear irrelevant in this case.

These figures together with the sheer fact that so many people thought that Evangelical religion had such a profound role in the shaping of this new society points to the fundamental importance of religion in the lives of Victorian Bathonians. A closer examination of these various religious groups, however, is important in focusing on the role of religion in Bath society at this time.

Beginning first with the Church of England one is confronted with an abundance of natural advantages at least in physical facilities and clerical staffing. Sharing the episcopal see with Wells, the city was an important centre for the Church. People were given ample accommodation in the Abbey, six parish churches and numerous chapels of ease. Many of the city's more distinguished residents by mid-century were clergymen (one hundred and eighteen in 1851). With so many churches and so many clergy, religion must have held some sway over the population.

<sup>9</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1852-53, LXXXVIII-I [1691-1].

<sup>10</sup> According to the 1831 census, 23.8 percent of the population of Bathwick were domestic servants (Parliamentary Papers, 1833, XXXVI-II [149]).

<sup>11</sup> K. S. INGLIS, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London, 1963); E. R. WICKHAM, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, 1959), and STANDISH MEACHAM, "The Church in the Victorian City," *Victorian Studies*, XI (March, 1968).

THE RELIGIOUS CENSUS OF 1851<sup>12</sup>

Bath — Municipal Borough Population 54,240	
Percentage of Sittings to Population	60%
Percentage of Total Attendances to Population	79.1% (42,886)
Estimated Percentage of Population at Divine Service	53.8% (29,182)

<i>Denomination</i>	<i>No. of Churches</i>	<i>Free Sittings</i>	<i>Appropriated Sittings</i>	<i>Attendance on Census Sunday</i>
Total	61	14,183	17,300	42,886
Church of England	28	9,163	10,477	26,415
Independent	2	470	960	2,640
Particular Baptist	5	574	1,730	3,033
Friends	1	300	—	68
Unitarians	1	—	300	295
Mormons	1	300	—	890
Wesleyan Methodists	5	782	1,654	1,953
Primitive Methodist	1	127	305	967
Wesleyan Association	1	80	100	184
Wesleyan Reformers	2	450	441	1,396
Lady Huntingdon's	3	520	550	1,590
New Church	1	—	300	150
Brethren	1	40	—	82
Isolated Congregations	3	970	250	1,550
Roman Catholics	3	70	50	1,395
Catholic and Apostolic Saints	1	77	153	206
Jews	1	10	30	72

Even in Bath's most decadent period in the eighteenth century at least some forms of religion were officially upheld. The city's great master of ceremonies, Richard "Beau" Nash, was a firm supporter of the Church. This, of course, was also part of his duty as host to the predominantly Anglican upper class tourists. Nash was perhaps better known for his unsuccessful opposition to "enthusiasm" and Methodism rather than to religion as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

Even before Nash's death in 1761, however, Evangelical fervour had reached Bath. Perhaps because of the city's reputation for decadence, such Christians were especially attracted to the area. The Church was profoundly

<sup>12</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1852-53, LXXXIX-I [1690]. The attendance figures were totals for morning, afternoon and evening services. In order to calculate the percentage of the population at Divine Service I took the formula devised by Horace Mann, the original planner of the 1851 Census — the morning attendances plus one-half of the afternoon attendances plus one-third of the evening attendances. The shortcomings of this method and of the census of 1851 in general are pointed out clearly in a number of good articles: K. S. INGLIS, "Patterns of Religious Worship in 1851," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (April, 1960); W. S. PICKERING, "The Census of 1851 — a Useless Experiment?" *British Journal of Sociology* (December, 1967), and D. M. THOMPSON, "The 1851 Religious Census: Problems and Possibilities," *Victorian Studies* (September, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> John WALTERS, *Splendour and Scandal: The Reign of Beau Nash* (London, 1968), chap. IX.

influenced by these groups. By mid nineteenth-century Bath boasted one of the strongest Evangelical parties in the West of England. According to the Unitarian minister, Jerom Murch, it was "the *fashion* to be evangelical"<sup>14</sup> among Churchmen as early as 1838. Evangelicals sponsored powerful Sabbatarian and Early Closing Movements in the city. There were also a number of famous Evangelical preachers in Bath.

One of these Evangelical clergymen was William Connor Magee, a future Archbishop of York. Magee, and other Evangelicals, were as much interested in the poor as the rich. Magee once preached a Sabbatarian sermon in 1856 in the Octagon Chapel stating that Sunday observance was one form of "protection of the poor and the weak against the rich and the powerful."<sup>15</sup> After 1840 there seemed to be many more unemployed poor people and vagrants in Bath than ever before. In examining the religious census of 1851 one observes that some of these poor must have been associated with the Church. One report from the Reverend Murray Dickson to the National Society in March, 1853 may shed light on the problems involved in this situation from the Church's point of view. Dickson wrote: "I have lately become rector of the parish of Trinity, Bath, containing a population of 8,000 souls — 4,000 of whom are poor, and these for the most part wretched and ignorant. There is no boy's school (connected with the church) in the parish and the room in which the girls are instructed is so unsuitable that the government has refused to allow a pupil teacher until a more suitable building is provided."<sup>16</sup> The picture may have been an exaggerated one but it does convey the impression that many in the Anglican flock were certainly less than prosperous.

Dissent lagged far behind the Church in gross numbers of adherents. There were few status inducements to join a Dissenting chapel. This was as true for the servant class as for those on top of the social ladder. Domestic workers were probably more inclined toward the Church both because of their loyalty to family and their search for respectability in the eyes of the predominantly Anglican upper classes.

The origins of Dissent in Bath were also humble but found amongst other groups — predominantly independent artisans and craftsmen. Presbyterians first met in a small shearing shop in 1700 for their services. Quakers and Baptists were also associated with basically the same elements before 1800.<sup>17</sup> In the nineteenth century very predictably the records of the various

<sup>14</sup> Jerom MURCH, "A Unitarian Bishop" *Burnt in Effigy, and The Church of England in the City of Bath* (Bath, 1839).

<sup>15</sup> W. C. MAGEE, *A Plea for the Poor Man's Sunday* (Bath, 1856), p. 14. The wider relationship of the Sabbatarians and similar groups to the Victorian public is capably explored by Brian HARRISON, "Religion and Recreation in Nineteenth-Century England," *Past and Present* (December 1967).

<sup>16</sup> The Reverend Murray Dixon to the National Society, 1 March, 1853 (Bath file, National Society, London).

<sup>17</sup> Philip CARTER, *Memoirs of the Life and Character of the Late Rev. John Paul Porter* (Bath, 1834), pp. 61-66; E. E. MOORE, *Travelling with Thomas Storey: The Life and Travels of an Eighteenth-Century Quaker* (Hertfordshire, 1947), p. 198.

Nonconformist chapels indicate that the bulk of the membership in these congregations was drawn from the tradesmen and shopkeeping classes. This is also indirectly borne out in the original individual returns of the 1851 religious census (by parishes) which indicates that the Nonconformists were most numerous in the tradesmen and artisan areas of the city — especially St. James's Parish.<sup>18</sup>

This picture of Dissent was similar to the situation in many Northern and Midland towns before the Industrial Revolution. In those places, however, a propertied Nonconformist elite was thrown up as a result of the advances in manufacturing. Nothing comparable to this happened in Bath. A small Dissenting elite of sorts did emerge by the early nineteenth century. But this elite was more of intellectual distinction and profession than of economic power.

No great list of prominent Dissenters emerges from the newspapers of the time. No pattern for unified action appears to have been laid out for the leading men (whether doctors, lawyers or teachers) of each congregation. In Northern and Midland towns in this period prominent Dissenters frequently banded together for social (and commercial) purposes or to do battle with the local Anglican Tory elite as the backbone of a Liberal-Radical political attack. In Bath even if the more prominent Dissenters had been more numerous they probably would have displayed little co-ordinated action. Unity among prominent Dissenters in most industrial towns was forged in combat with the local Anglican elites. No such combative spirit prevailed in Bath.

Lack of men of much substance was apparent among the Baptists. It was also reflected indirectly in the special preoccupation of that denomination in dealing with the problem of poverty within the membership. One of its most famous institutions of this chapel was the penny club for poor members instituted by John Paul Porter in 1825.<sup>19</sup> The Independents also appear to have been concerned with poorer members in sustaining their Workingmen's Benefit Society and a Home Missionary Society from the funds of the Argyle Chapel. Their membership, however, seemed more concerned with reaching the poor than being totally "of the poor." The inconclusive results of their efforts were obvious. A letter published in *The Patriot* on November 26, 1863 accused the deacons of the Argyle Chapel of neglecting "the outlying masses, upwards of twenty thousand of whom in that city alone it is believed never enter a place of worship."

The Unitarian congregation in the city traced its ancestry to a small group of English Presbyterians engaged in the cloth trade in the seventeenth century.<sup>20</sup> The congregation was fortunate in having a number of very capable ministers including David Jardine, a close friend of Joseph Priestley,

<sup>18</sup> H.O. 129/326-1 (P.R.O.).

<sup>19</sup> *Somerset Street Baptist Chapel Minute Books*, vol. II, November 29, 1825 (kept at Manvers Street Baptist Church, Bath).

<sup>20</sup> H. D. WIARD, *Some Notes on Unitarianism in Bath* (Bath, 1951).

and Jerom Murch. Though numerically small, the Unitarian congregation supplied much of the local Nonconformist elite in the nineteenth century. This may have been due to the intellectually active qualities of some of its members.<sup>21</sup> Murch's contribution to city government, for example, was enormous. Unitarians also seemed to abound in the Bath and West of England society. They were especially associated with concerted intellectual efforts to foster and improve agricultural as well as industrial innovation and the arts sponsored by the society. Jerom Murch writing in 1845 also noted "a large proportion of ladies and unfortunately comparatively few poor people"<sup>22</sup> in the congregation. The register of burials from 1819 to 1837,<sup>23</sup> however, indicates that this congregation too had a large number of tradesmen, shopkeepers and artisans.

Another denomination identified rightly or wrongly with the common people in some minds was Methodism. The proximity of the city to Wesley's headquarters at Bristol naturally made Bath a target for early Methodist fervour. The pleasures and amusements of "Satan's Headquarters" increased Methodist desire to combat sin in the area. John Wesley made several preaching tours to Bath as early as 1739. The growth in numbers of followers and facilities throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicates the ultimate effect of such efforts.

The displeasure of Bath civic authorities toward Methodists in the eighteenth century was not surprising. It had been feared that Methodists would inhibit wealthy visitors from engaging fully in the amusements of the city. This, in consequence, would have undermined the economy of Bath. Beau Nash personally directed a vigorous campaign against the Methodists until the conversion of Celina, Countess of Huntingdon, to their cause. The Huntingdon house in Bath then became both a refuge for Methodist preachers and the rallying point for the new denomination making further inroads into the wealthier classes of the city. Methodism became almost as fashionable as Evangelicalism as a whole by the late eighteenth century. It was obvious by the religious census of 1851 that Methodists in all of their various forms were quite numerous in Bath. Yet no precise information appears to be available on the social composition of these congregations. The very high number of Wesleyan Reformers must have also been the product of doctrinal or even social tension within local chapels.

The religious census of 1851 and contemporary accounts of life in Victorian Bath not only reveal the general religiosity of the people but the

<sup>21</sup> Wealthy manufacturers were, of course, not to be found amongst Bath Dissenters as a whole. Intellectual prowess was characteristic of English Unitarianism in general. So too was their leadership of Dissent in social and political causes in many towns. See R. V. HOLT, *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England* (London, 1938), and R. K. WEBB, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (London, 1960).

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Jerom Murch to John Gordon, August 16, 1845 (M.S. Letter Collection in The Unitarian College, Manchester, C1/51).

<sup>23</sup> R.G. 4/2348 (P.R.O.).



wide range of denominations and sects tolerated in the community. Tolerated is the right word for there could be found many things unusual in a provincial society such as an experiment to construct an English Catholic University at Prior Park<sup>24</sup> just outside Bath and a small but highly respected Jewish synagogue. There are some reasonable explanations for this. Many of these non-Anglican groups were numerically weak and therefore could safely be tolerated. Some also had rather influential people associated with them. Even the New Church congregation, while containing many tradesmen and artisans in its fold as in other parts of England, could claim James Keene, owner and editor of the successful *Bath Journal*, and William Bush a respected politician (elected mayor in 1855).<sup>25</sup> These prominent sectarians, however, exhibited a very amicable spirit toward Bath society and Bath society expressed the same feeling toward them.

The absence of a strongly combative Nonconformist elite may have attracted some people of Nonconformist background away from the old Dissenting congregations to these newer, more active groups. The nature and history of Bath society also accounted for the proliferation of such associations. The self-indulgent and slightly hypochondriac among the wealthy who came to the health-giving waters of the spa in the eighteenth century attracted many camp followers. Medical quacks and science cults, Mesmerists and various forms of Spiritualism flourished in the area.

The continued attraction of many people to these groups after Bath ceased to be an important tourist centre may have been the result of other things besides a tradition of tolerating the "bizarre." The fact that there were significant numbers of retired, middle-aged and elderly people of substance may be one sociological explanation. Gibbs' *Bath Visitant* advised the reader of 1835 that "of all places in the kingdom, Bath is best fitted for the retirement of individuals with independent incomes, whether small or large." Certainly the age factor is important in explaining the appeal of some of the more unusual groups in certain areas of Southern California today. Census figures for the whole of Bath society, however, do not indicate a dramatically larger number of people at the age of "riper knowledge" (40-60) of "mature life" (60 and upwards) than in the nation as a whole.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, it really does not take too many people in those categories to maintain a variety of such organizations. Most of the population, in any

<sup>24</sup> The work of the eccentric but zealous Bishop Baines, Vicar Apostolic of the Western District.

<sup>25</sup> David CHIVERS, *The New Church in Bath* (Bath, 1895). Interest in literary endeavours by members of the new sects was not restricted to James Keene. The Plymouth Brethern's *Missionary Echo* was started in Bath in 1872. See F. R. COAD, *A History of the Brethern Movement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1969), p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> *Population Age Distribution, 1851* (P.P. 1852-53, LXXXVIII-I, [1691-1]).

Age	England	Bath
40-60	16.64%	19.68%
60-80	6.67%	9.06%
80-	0.51%	0.82%
Total over 39	23.82%	29.56%

case, appears to have been much more involved in religious and quasi-religious activities than in most other large urban areas in the nation as can be seen by any survey of town histories in this period.

The religious orientation of the population also cast a shadow over many so-called secular associations. Bath Chartism, for example, took on sect-like qualities under the direction of Henry Vincent with his "Democratic chapels" and Chartist Teetotal activities. This was quite unusual though a few Chartist chapels certainly exist in places like Birmingham at this time.

The high degree of religiosity among Bathonians does not appear to have contributed to their desire for sectarian conflict as a whole. Purely religious issues leading to denominational conflict were, of course, not that plentiful at the local level in Victorian England. Theologically-rooted social conflicts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' sense were not of any great number or significance. Where denominations were forced to come together on important matters, however, there could be trouble. Education, church rates and burial boards were important matters and sparked some direct conflicts between religious denominations even in Bath. A dispute over the "test of orthodoxy" in admitting people into bible societies caused bad feelings between some Churchmen and Dissenters in the British and Foreign Bible Society (leading to the formation of a small rival, Anglican-dominated Trinitarian Bible Society in 1836).<sup>27</sup> Other education activities occasionally brought Churchmen and Dissenters into conflict. Generally speaking, however, direct denominational disputes rarely received great publicity or enthusiasm. The Bath Mechanics Institution, an organization somewhat tied to Dissent,<sup>28</sup> seemed more concerned with disputes between "genteels" and mechanics in its own ranks than with anti-Church activities. The school board issue of the last months of 1870, so disturbing in some parts of the country, was settled in a way that managed to avoid all-out sectarian warfare through the emphasis of the positive need for more educational facilities in the city.

The question of the church rate, so volatile in some places, did not greatly stir Bath's Nonconformist community. In 1826 there was a stormy Easter vestry meeting in Walcot parish over the proposal of an extra rate to meet the costs of lighting the parish church. Arthur Calvert, a leading opponent of the new rate, questioned the legality of actions by the "hydra" of self-elected, self-auditing parish vestrymen.<sup>29</sup> The dispute was only peripherally denominational. The opposition seemed to have come largely from wealthy and revered persons (many of whom must have been Anglicans) who simply resented the extra tax burden. Anglicans even went so far as to criticize the church rate itself on occasion. A certain Mr. Chaffin, an

<sup>27</sup> Edwin T. CAULFIELD, *The Points at Issue Between the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Trinitarian Bible Society* (Bath, 1838).

<sup>28</sup> The *Bath Journal* of 25 April 1825 discussed some of the objections of Churchmen to the institute.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur A. CALVERT, *Local Taxation, To the Parishioners of Walcot* (originally in the *Bath Herald*, 19 April 1828).

Anglican, led an attack on a motion to allow the churchwardens of St. Saviour's<sup>30</sup> to keep surplus pew rents. Chaffin stated that he opposed the church rate and all other methods of coercive revenue gathering. Chaffin also indicated his distaste for the Vicar's surplice.

The only alleged "Quaker-led" attempt to abolish the church rate occurred in Bathwick parish in 1863. The voting reveals that both numbers (and therefore the bulk of property in this affluent parish) were on the Church rate side:<sup>31</sup>

	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Votes</i>
For Rate	127	238
Against Rate	15	22

The City records indicate that the church rate was regularly collected in a number of parishes well into the eighteen-sixties. Whether there was strong opposition to the church rate in St. James's parish, however, is not clear from the evidence.

In the area of anti-Catholicism, Bath witnessed little activity beyond the annual Guy Fawkes sermons and the occasional criticism in print of Prior Park.<sup>32</sup> The retiring quality of the small, predominately native-born Roman Catholic community in Bath made it a poor target for the venting of social antagonism.

The "indirect" expression of sectarian conflict through politics was, of course, a much more important source of social disharmony. Kitson Clark has written that politics and religion were really inseparable for most Victorians.<sup>33</sup> This was true for Bath but the link between sectarian animosity and politics was, however, much less evident than in provincial industrial towns in the same period.<sup>34</sup> The religiosity of Bathonians may also have acted as a check rather than as an inducement to this source of political tension.

In the crucial area of local politics there can be little doubt that Churchmen (Anglican laymen) held most of the power. An Anglican oligarchy ruled the corporation before municipal reform in 1835. Town government had been a model of efficiency in the eighteenth century under Nash to the benefit of both tourists and residents, Anglicans and Dissenters. There is no indication that there was special discrimination against Dissenters in the corporation after 1828 or on the boards of police commissioners. If discrimination did exist on any of these bodies it was more of a social and

<sup>30</sup> *Bath Journal*, 13 May 1848.

<sup>31</sup> *Bath Journal*, 4 June 1863.

<sup>32</sup> There was one rather unusual display of Anti-catholicism in a play performed in 1833 entitled "Popery Triumphant."

<sup>33</sup> George Kitson CLARK, *The Making of Victorian England* (London, 1962), p. 162.

<sup>34</sup> There are many urban histories containing sections on sectarianism and politics. See especially A. Temple PATTERSON, *Radical Leicester* (Leicester, 1954), *passim*. The first four chapters of my own unpublished Ph.D. thesis *The Sectarian Spirit* (University of Toronto, 1971), dealt specifically with this question in four Northern cotton towns.

economic nature against small property owners. Pre-reform government whether in corporation, court leet or police commissions was the preserve of only a wealthy minority.

Municipal reform did not bring an avalanche of Nonconformists to power as in some towns. Again because of the lack of a thrusting Nonconformist elite this was not possible. The tolerant attitude of the Anglican oligarchy also took heavily from the force of any argument that could be developed by political Dissent. Most Dissenters in Bath as elsewhere were inclined toward Whig Liberalism in their politics. But the basis of the political factions in council was hardly founded in sectarian allegiances. The first mayor of the reformed corporation in 1835 was in fact a respected Quaker gentleman — W. T. Blair. Blair was elected mayor by the Reformist Liberal majority after a very uneventful election in late 1835. Though the new corporation and poor law union saw some increase in tradesmen and artisans among their number these bodies were still weighted with gentlemen of independent means and members of the professions.<sup>35</sup> It was not in fact until 1860 that a council member “of the trading class” (and a wealthy one at that), Thomas Jolly, was elected mayor. The actual number of Nonconformists on the corporation through the years cannot be known with any certainty.

Political disputes in the reformed council revolved around corporation expenditure, the need for certain civic improvements and the social background of council members.<sup>36</sup> Examples of overt sectarianism among politicians in council were rare. Displays of tolerance were also very common. In the election for mayor in November, 1844, for example, there was a severe split in council over the choice. The Liberals massed behind Admiral Gordon, an important party leader, and defeated the Conservative-backed choice, Sutcliffe, by a vote of 30 to 17. Gordon, though a Churchman, felt a certain responsibility in representing a party with a substantial Nonconformist element in it. Gordon refused to attend the traditional Abbey service as part of the installation ritual.<sup>37</sup> Admiral Gordon may have also been motivated by a certain anti-clerical spirit but this is not clear from his statements.

Often well-known Nonconformists in council took part in outside activities with sectarian overtones. William Hunt and George Cox, the ex-Chartist, for example, were important supporters of the Peace Society. This involvement led them to make a well-publicized series of anti-war speeches at the

<sup>35</sup> This can be deduced by studying the council's social composition. This is accomplished by co-ordinating newspaper and official corporation membership lists with the numerous directories and pollbooks for Bath. Assessment rolls can also be useful for a picture of the extent of property ownership of the members of council.

<sup>36</sup> From an inspection of the council records — principally the Council Division Book (held at the city record office) and newspaper accounts. The newspapers, which were politically alive, in particular stressed the question of social background of corporation members. The issue of the “social debasement” of the corporation through the election of non-gentlemen and non-professional men was raised again and again.

<sup>37</sup> *Bath Herald*, 16 November 1844.

local Friends' Meeting House in November, 1846.<sup>38</sup> Nonconformists, however, on the whole were not very outspoken in political matters.

The climax to Nonconformist and Liberal influence in local government seemed to arrive with the election of Jerom Murch, the former Unitarian minister, as mayor in November 1864. Murch represented the majoritarian opinion in the Liberal ranks in council—somewhat socially exclusive, tolerant and profoundly localist. Murch's allegiance to city was obvious at many points in his career. In 1856 he urged the Bath board of guardians to make a resolution against centralism. This was negative localism. Murch's positive localism grew at least in part from his concern for social reform—a characteristic common to many Unitarians at this time. There were many instances of his positive localism.

In 1864, for example, Frederick Hanham produced a report on sanitary conditions in the Bath poor law union.<sup>39</sup> In the report, Hanham urged immediate action to stop the pollution found in the Avon river. The next year Murch produced a pamphlet<sup>40</sup> urging that municipal government deal with this problem. Murch believed that the corporation must move into new areas of civic life if the city was going to progress. He believed that while certain activities would be economically unprofitable for the corporation, such as purifying the Avon river, other things could be—e.g. the more efficient supply of cold water to the city. Murch wanted to see the creation of great municipal structures rivaling "those of Geneva." This could only be done by extending the powers of local government.

Murch got the opportunity to campaign actively for the adoption of many of these ideas in council in the eighteen-sixties. One of the most memorable events of his career was his speech to the council in favour of the establishment of a school board on December 20, 1870. Urging that sectarian feelings be set aside for the moment, Murch described the need to help educate the children of Bath. Their wretched state compelled Murch to call them "the Arabs of the Street."<sup>41</sup> The motion for a school board was unanimously passed in spite of the religious mixture of the council membership. Many of the most prominent Anglican clergy as well as Nonconformist ministry had supported Murch's appeal. Their committee of clergy's report on school accommodation, together with a petition presented to council on December 6, 1870, containing most of their signatures, allowed Murch to

<sup>38</sup> *Bath Journal*, 21 November 1846.

<sup>39</sup> Frederick HANHAM, *A Report on the Sanitary State of the Bath Union* (Bath, 1864).

<sup>40</sup> Jerom MURCH, *Reasons for Bathforum House: With Remarks on other Municipal Objects by the Mayor of Bath* (Bath, 1865). Murch's hopes for Bath were not unlike the hopes for English towns in general expressed by another Nonconformist, Robert Vaughan, in his well-known work *The Age of Great Cities* published in the early eighteen-forties. Many more examples of the work of Nonconformists in the great provincial towns can be seen in Asa BRIGGS, *Victorian Cities* (London, 1963); especially Chapter 5 on Birmingham.

<sup>41</sup> *Bath Chronicle*, 22 December 1870.

speak with a solid inter-denominational backing.<sup>42</sup> Murch was not merely a leader of Dissent but a leader of local Christian opinion on the subject. Even the openly contested election for school board members was almost averted through inter-denominational discussion in December 1870 and the early months of 1871.<sup>43</sup>

One month before the "Arabs of the Street" speech, Murch had made a nominating speech for the mayorial candidate, John Holbert, in November, 1870. In the speech Murch summed up his feelings, and perhaps those of many Bath Nonconformist Liberals, on municipal government: "I believe that in all corporate towns of the kingdom, in all the free cities of Europe, municipal life has been fed, municipal rulers have been furnished, by the class which I denominate the burgher class. It is a simple historical fact that for three hundred years in every municipality in the Kingdom, from Scotland at one end to Cornwall at the other, that class has been the chief source of our municipal life, producing everywhere a constant succession of municipal rulers, — men who have administered justice fairly to rich and poor — men who have fostered charitable and educational institutions — men who have done good service in their day to the cause of Freedom, Progress, Knowledge and Religion. If they owe something to England, England owes much to them . . ."<sup>44</sup> These words could have been spoken by another great provincial Unitarian and mayor of the same period — Birmingham's Joseph Chamberlain.

Since Bath politics was so infrequently a vehicle for sectarian conflict, sectarianism was more apt to rear its head into political life from "out of doors" at will in an unorganized fashion. In April 1859, for example, the question of the town council becoming the official burial board for the city caused uneasiness among the denominations. Those who supported the idea in the city were mostly Dissenters and the council received petitions from eight Nonconformist chapels and two vestries (St. James and Lyncombe and Widcombe) dominated largely by Nonconformist Radicals. Those in the city who opposed the motion were mostly orthodox Churchmen. The council then received counter-petitions from four existing parish burial boards and

<sup>42</sup> Among Murch's most prominent Anglican supporters were G. E. Tate, Vicar of Widcombe, and J. Macnaught, Incumbent of Laura Chapel, and W. Hunt, an Anglican layman. The Reverend Canon Bernard, however, opposed Murch's plan for a school board on the grounds that it would involve "religious compromise" and that it would intrude municipal politics into education. His suspicions were undoubtedly aroused by the behaviour of political Dissent elsewhere on the subject of school boards.

<sup>43</sup> A formula of five Nonconformists and six Churchmen for the eleven candidates (including the actual names of the candidates) had been jointly approved by a Nonconformist and an Anglican committee. It was, in fact, Murch who disrupted this arrangement and made a contested election necessary by also supporting the candidacy of two women in late January, 1871. The result of the poll in February was to see five Nonconformists (including the two women) and six Churchmen elected. A number of candidates were also defeated in this election including Murch himself. The fact that Murch had acted as chairman of the Ladies' Committee was interpreted by many as a desire on his part not to serve. See *Bath Chronicle*, 9 February 1871.

<sup>44</sup> *Bath Chronicle*, 10 November 1870.

the churchwardens of St. Michael's parish — all fervently Anglican.<sup>45</sup> The petition to the Queen requesting the burial board was carried by 24 votes to 23. The petition included a special section requesting that a portion of the cemetery be set aside for Nonconformist use.

Though Bath's local politics was much less exciting than that of most industrial towns in the period, its parliamentary political activity for a time was quite eventful. Between 1832 and 1847 the city, in fact, was the scene of intense Radical political activity. J. A. Roebuck dramatically broke into the machinery of parliamentary politics in the Bath constituency in 1832. The youthful Roebuck proclaimed the need for a wide variety of reform measures, one of which was the total disestablishment of the Church. Roebuck's proposals concerning the Church and its property certainly attracted Nonconformists to his cause.<sup>46</sup> Many of these Nonconformists were also tradesmen and artisans. It is clear from the pollbooks that the bulk of Roebuck's Radical support was found in the tradesmen parishes of the city. It is therefore not difficult to see why Roebuck felt that Nonconformist support was essential to his success.

As the years passed, however, Roebuck's Radical thought became progressively more secular. Roebuck may have underestimated the "religious" feelings of Nonconformists and others in Bath. Leaders of the Dissenting community, especially Jerom Murch, became opposed to Roebuckian Radicalism. Sabbatarians, Teetotallers and other groups also became offended by Roebuck's speeches. Roebuck, before his departure from the Bath political scene in 1847, put the blame for his electoral defeats in 1837 and 1847 squarely on the shoulders of the Nonconformists.<sup>47</sup> In his final speech, immediately after his polling day defeat, Roebuck defiantly pointed out that he was an Anglican and would remain so.<sup>48</sup> The speech was a bitter condemnation of the Bath Nonconformists. Roebuck had underrated the religious qualities and overrated the sectarian hatreds among Bathonians.

In spite of the great appeal that Radicalism had for the tradesmen and artisan classes for a time, by the late eighteen-forties it began to disappear from the scene and it never returned. Radical politics, as Neale has pointed out, was dependent on the rising economic expectations of the prosperous tradesmen, artisans and shopkeepers of the city.<sup>49</sup> By 1850 the number of

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 April 1859.

<sup>46</sup> Pro-Roebuck Squibs surviving for the 1832 election make a strong plea for the support of Dissenters. Similarly Churchmen often attacked Roebuck. A. P. Falconer, Vice-President of the Roebuck Committee, even wrote a public letter to the Bishop protesting against a clergyman's Anti-Roebuck sermon in October, 1832.

<sup>47</sup> The pollbooks for 1837 and 1847 indicate that only a slight shift of votes in St. James and Walcot wards (when compared with the 1832 and 1835 polls). In 1847 the slight shifts away from Roebuck were in Bathwick and Walcot parishes.

<sup>48</sup> Norman GASH, *Reaction and Reconstruction in English Politics* (Oxford, 1965), p. 105. Roebuck again made disparaging remarks about Bath's Dissenters four months later at a public dinner for him in the city's guildhall (*Bath Journal*, 6 November 1847).

<sup>49</sup> See R. S. NEALE, *Class and Ideology in the Nineteenth Century*, esp. chap. II.

people in service industries was no longer growing. Victorian Bath could look to no future expansion in its resident population and the continuously declining property values in the city were a depressing omen of hard times to come. This, of course, may well have not been unique for a Victorian non-industrial town but it was the situation in Bath.

Tradesmen and artisans were also found among the leaders of the Chartist movement in the city.<sup>50</sup> Here again religious convictions imposed limits rather than incentives for violent political activity. Though Chartist disturbances occurred in the economically-depressed areas of West Wilts, Bath Chartism was almost entirely without violence. Bath Chartists were also very often staunch Christians. In the late eighteen-thirties when Bath Chartism reached its height this latter fact was very obvious. In 1838 a certain Mr. Campbell, an Owenite, was denounced by many Chartists for his atheism.<sup>51</sup> In August of 1839, when many parish churches throughout the country witnessed great disturbances, Bath Chartists were anything but aggressive toward the Church. The *Bath Journal* described their behaviour in the Abbey on that occasion: "The service then proceeded and did not suffer the slightest interruption; indeed, on the contrary, so orderly were they in their demeanor, that we were much gratified to perceive the practice by many of the Chartists of the old fashioned but very seemly custom of bowing to the clergyman as he passed them on his passage to and from the pulpit and desk."<sup>52</sup>

Politics, whether local or parliamentary at the local level, was a dull business through most of the mid-Victorian period. Sectarian conflict was not a marketable political organizing principle in this tolerant community though the basic direction and scope of politics was heavily influenced by the religious sensibilities of the inhabitants. The religious tolerance could even attract the eccentric to politics. Thomas Spencer,<sup>53</sup> perpetual curate of Hinton Charterhouse, was involved in both local and parliamentary politics in the city. The "politics" of the early Bath poor law union largely revolved around pro-Spencer and anti-Spencer factions. As the poor law commission reports reveal, no one was quite sure what direction Spencer would take next.<sup>54</sup> In parliamentary politics the curate was committed to the Anti-Corn Law League, Temperance and the reduction of the power of the Church. This made him a curious oddity. His work on behalf of these causes must

<sup>50</sup> These included among others, the Bartlett brothers, shoemakers, and A. Phillips, a plasterer. The leadership of the Radical party tended to be more "upper middle class."

<sup>51</sup> W. P. Roberts, a Chartist leader, even had a public debate with the "atheist" Campbell revolving around religious questions.

<sup>52</sup> *Bath Journal*, 31 August 1839.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Spencer (1796-1853), uncle of Herbert Spencer, received his curacy in 1826. He involved himself in most national and local reformist causes of the period and wrote a great many pamphlets. This parish of Hinton was a model of a well-ordered community with village school and library. He was the first chairman of the Bath poor law union. He resigned his curacy in 1847 to go to London and edit the *National Temperance Chronicle*. Spencer is in need of a biographer.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Weale to the Commission, January 17, 1838. M.H. 12/10159 (P.R.O.).



rank him as one of the more unusual political parsons of the nineteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Yet he was reasonably tolerated in Bath.

To conclude, then, Bathonians, according to all available indices, were religious people in the mid-Victorian period. Their religiosity, however, was essentially in the area of internal denominational activity, new sectarian interests or possibly in personal religious experience. It was rarely to be found in sectarian conflict. The reasons for this are not entirely clear. The social structure and social developments in the city do, however, provide some clues.

By the eighteen-thirties Bath was already living in the shadow of its past glory. Overlooked by the most influential of the nation it now sank into provincial obscurity surviving on the expenditure of its wealthier residents. Even this situation, however, was not to persist through the mid-Victorian era. The economy began to stagnate and the population levelled off by 1840. Dejection was as common among the labouring class as among the wealthy (many being ill or old) by that time. All sorts of religious activity flourished in this environment suggesting the truth of E. P. Thompson's notion that religion was the chiasm of despair for many in English society.<sup>56</sup>

Standard social factors in Victorian England as a whole also assisted the religiosity of Bathonians. "Respectability" or the desire for it must have encouraged many in the servant class to emulate their employers in attending Divine Service. This of course did much to broaden the basis of religious support in Bath. Even women played an important role in the churches from the Countess of Huntingdon who helped to launch Methodism in the city to the "great preponderance of *bonnets*" that seemed to dictate the modes of behaviour for Unitarian ministers.<sup>57</sup> In this situation they may also have helped to broaden if not democratize the appeal of organized religion. The vibrance of certain political movements enkindled the fires of traditional Nonconformist strength in the tradesmen and shopkeeping classes probably adding numbers to the fold. Standard Victorian social factors as well as factors peculiar to Bath all assisted in determining the wide scope and meaningful role which religious life had in this community. This active religious life, in turn, affected the very social climate that had helped to create it.

<sup>55</sup> Spencer attended the Manchester Conference of Nonconformist ministers supporting the Anti-Corn Law League in 1840. He was even elected one of its four chairmen.

<sup>56</sup> See E. P. THOMPSON, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), chap. 11, part 2.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Jerom Murch to John Gordon, October 3, 1845 (M.S. Letter Collection, The Unitarian College, Manchester, C1/51). It may have been the "bonnets" who also pushed Murch's public support for the two women candidates for the school board in 1871.