

Divine providence and epidemic cholera : a contribution to the study of secularization of thought in nineteenth century England

Corinne J Grimley Evans (1995)

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ABSTRACT

The concept of providence was a prominent and pervasive theme in public discourse in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and upon momentous occasions in nineteenth-century England. Perceptions of divine involvement and purpose in human affairs, particularly in the domain of providence, seemed to be at the heart of a religious culture that was undergoing significant change. The mid-century years, characterized by the Industrial Revolution, provided an opportunity to explore processes of secularization and the changing nature of religious thought in nineteenth-century England.

**DIVINE PROVIDENCE AND EPIDEMIC CHOLERA:  
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF SECULARIZATION OF  
THOUGHT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND**

Corinne J Grimley Evans

This thesis explores a critical twenty-four year period, 1817-1841, during which cholera epidemics in England and Europe were first identified and understood. The thesis examines the responses of different sections of society, and the role of providence in the development of public health measures. It argues that changing views about the nature and extent of divine involvement in human affairs, particularly in the domain of providence, were central to the development of public health measures. The thesis also examines the role of providence in the development of public health measures, and the role of providence in the development of public health measures.

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## ABSTRACT

The idea of providence was a prominent and pervasive theme in public discourse on subjects of national importance, and upon momentous occasions in nineteenth-century England. Perceptions of divine involvement and purpose in human affairs embodied in the notion of providence seemed to be at the heart of a religious world view in the Christian tradition, and thus essential elements for study in any historical investigation of religious change. The midcentury years, ostensibly a period of high religious consciousness, provide an opportunity to explore processes which were eventually to lead to the more secular nature of society apparent by the end of the century. The recurring cholera epidemics between 1831 and 1854 were alarming events which provoked reactions throughout society; they provide a means of tracing developments in perceptions of providential involvement in calamitous events during a critical twenty-four year period. Systematic surveys of a broad range of sources, including newspapers, periodicals and sermons were carried out to document the responses of different sections of society, and facilitated investigation of cross-sectional and longitudinal patterns in religious attitudes. It was hypothesised that changing ideas about the nature and extent of providential action in relation to epidemic disease could provide an index of the process of secularization of thought, and thus contribute to the wider debate on secularization.

The results vindicated the use of the concept of providence to explore religious consciousness. They have confirmed the mid-nineteenth century to be a critical period for religious change. Analysis of religious perceptions of cholera at three points in time produced a complex picture of changing attitudes, including an unexpected peaking of providential interpretations by some observers during the second epidemic. However, the variation between different sources and social groups did not obscure a significant longer-term trend of decline in providential attitudes, consistent with a secularization of thought during the quarter of a century studied.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

So far it is vain to talk of natural laws for it is a mere gratuitous assumption to suppose these laws omnipotent over all creation, visible and invisible, known and unknown, intelligible and utterly mysterious. So, if we allow a notion of a Deity and an overruling Providence once to enter our thoughts we are bound to admit that in the history of the recent pestilence we ought to recognise an actual deliverance and accordingly as on this day to present our humble and thankful acknowledgements (The Times Editorial, 15 November 1849)

Talk as we may of secondary causes, let anyone read the historical account of cholera and then let him doubt if he can that there is an over-ruling Providence, that permits and guides the progress of this disease (Letter to The Times 15 September 1849)

These quotations from The Times are illustrative of the widely-perceived association of cholera with the idea of providential purpose in the nineteenth-century cholera epidemics. In both editorial and correspondence examples, the course of the epidemic is used as evidence of supernatural involvement, and explanations in purely material terms are dismissed as inadequate. The distance between this type of response in 1849 and any reaction to a natural disaster likely to appear in editorials or correspondence columns of The Times in the late twentieth century is striking and indicative of cultural changes more profound than is consonant with the sense of continuity generally felt with many other aspects of Victorian thought. A chronological study of society's response to the three cholera epidemics between 1831 and 1854 suggests that the processes of change which were to lead to the dominance of a fundamentally different world view were already at work during the midcentury years.

The nineteenth-century cholera epidemics have been the subject of extensive historical research ever since Asa Briggs first directed attention to their potential as a research tool in 1961 [1]. Briggs saw the possibility of combining demographic and historical approaches in systematic comparisons of the impact of

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[1] Asa Briggs, "Cholera and society in the nineteenth century", Past and Present 19 (1961), p.76-96.

cholera in different places at different points in time in order to explore a variety of societal functions. The five domains specified by him as relevant to this study included demography, economic and social structure, political circumstances and medical knowledge; religion received little attention here although it was acknowledged that "religion plays an interesting part in the study of cholera" and that "there is room for a fuller study of the impact of cholera on religion". The comprehensive review by Richard Evans of progress in this field during the quarter of a century since Briggs's seminal article appeared suggests that the earlier expectations regarding religion have yet to be fully met; from Evans' critique of existing studies of cholera in Europe, it is clear that religious aspects of the nineteenth-century epidemics have remained a minority interest [2].

However, religious responses to cholera have frequently been included in the range of themes covered in general studies of the epidemics during this period. Rosenberg's early study of cholera in America used the successive epidemics to compare reactions of different communities and sections of society at each outbreak in order to trace social change across a broad spectrum. From the religious responses documented he concluded that there had been a "dissipation of piety" during the period 1832 to 1866, which he perceived as part of the longer term decline in intensity of religious feeling from the seventeenth century to the present [3]. In a recently reprinted article on the study of cholera in Europe, Rosenberg reaffirmed his view of cholera as a valuable research tool or sampling device. He concluded that the European epidemics confirmed the broad findings of American studies, namely that religious interpretations of cholera, which had been prominent during the first epidemic, had become marginal by the 1860s. He also suggested that during the 1830s religious and moralistic perceptions formed "a segregated supplementary domain, alternative to scientific and empirical knowledge" [4]. However, this use of cholera as a cross-sectional phenomenon

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[2] Richard Evans, "Epidemics and revolution: cholera in nineteenth-century Europe", Past and Present 120 (1988), p.123-46.

[3] Charles Rosenberg, The Cholera Years, Chicago (1962) p.4.

[4] Charles Rosenberg, "Cholera in nineteenth-century Europe", Explaining Epidemics and Other Studies in the History of Medicine, Cambridge (1992) p.114. (Reprinted from Comparative Studies in Society and History 8 (1966).



is presented as particularly valuable as a means of analysing social, scientific and economic developments in a rapidly developing society, rather than as a means of tracing religious change during the period of epidemics.

The British cholera epidemics have received attention in a number of general works, though rarely have these made use of the recurrence of epidemics to trace specifically religious developments. The studies by Morris [5] and Durey [6], for example, were predominantly histories of the first epidemic rather than comparative studies of several outbreaks. In each of these works, cholera was used as a means of exploring the resilience of society at a time of social crisis, the epidemic being seen primarily as a test of social cohesion. Religious responses were also included within the broad spectrum of social reactions covered in a more accessible general history by Longmate, but although this work covered four epidemics between 1831 and 1866, the first epidemic was again the primary object of study [7]. Furthermore, as the subtitle of this work indicates, Longmate's interest in cholera was in the disease itself rather than in its potential as an investigative tool. In fact none of the major English studies have fully exploited Rosenberg's suggested use of cholera as a sampling device to study social change. The closest approach to this model is a narrower comparative study by Morris, in which medical pamphlets from the first three epidemics in Oxford were compared [8]. From this sample of three pamphlets, which he claimed were characteristic of the literature produced by each epidemic, Morris inferred a clear pattern of development in religious perceptions and, like Rosenberg, concluded that religious beliefs did not hamper medical scientific progress at this time. Religious themes have not featured in more recent research on the British epidemics, which has tended to focus on the role of cholera in such areas as developments in urban management [9], and local government and sanitary reform [10]. In

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[5] R Morris, Cholera 1832: the Social Response to an Epidemic (1976).

[6] M Durey, The Return of the Plague, Dublin (1979)

[7] N Longmate, King Cholera: the Biography of a Disease (1966)

[8] R Morris, "Religion and medicine: the cholera pamphlets of Oxford" Medical History, 19(3) 1975, p.256-70.

[9] G Kearns "Aspects of cholera, society and space in nineteenth-century England and Wales", unpublished PhD thesis, Cambridge 1985.

summary, it would seem that while the cholera epidemics have continued to inspire research into economic, political and medical aspects of nineteenth-century history, the religious dimension, although not totally neglected, has attracted rather less of the systematic comparative study called for by Briggs.

The present study proposes to use the recurring cholera epidemics of the mid-nineteenth century to investigate specific changes in religious consciousness. In contrast with most of the studies described above, it is not intended to explore the changes wrought by the epidemics upon specified societal variables. Although the role of cholera as a determinant of change has also to be considered, cholera will be used here primarily in the manner suggested by Rosenberg, as a sampling device, or more accurately, as a probe, to gauge the state of religious opinion at different points in time. The recurring epidemics provided an arresting and unignorable stimulus which elicited comparable responses from a broad spectrum of society at each outbreak. Cholera was distinct from other equally fatal diseases. It was deeply shocking, not only because of the speed with which it destroyed previously healthy victims, but also because its physical features were an affront to middle class sensibility. Moreover, the nature of these symptoms denied any possibility of a peaceful and "beautiful" death. The severity of its impact rendered inadequate the conventional emotional and intellectual mechanisms by which society coped with more familiar forms of death. Cholera thus evoked an immediate and potentially revealing reaction from all sections of society. Just as the Rorschach blot test has been used by present day psychologists to elicit responses that may reveal underlying emotional structures, so cholera can provide a means of inferring the underlying premises and assumptions which determined an individual's world view in the last century. The nature of "the act of God" popularly envisaged, the religious interpretations elicited, and the behaviour deemed appropriate can serve to reveal the qualities of the deity invoked and the structure of prevailing religious belief systems. If such interpretations can be read at successive points in time, developments in religious ideas can be traced.

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[10] M Sigsworth "Cholera in the large towns of West and East Ridings 1848-93", unpublished PhD thesis, CNNA 1991.

On one level, public responses to the three cholera epidemics appear to provide evidence of a secularization of society during the twenty-four year period. At the first appearance of what was widely accepted as a divine visitation, the religious significance of cholera appeared hardly controversial; cholera's special status was sanctioned by the government in several national acts of piety. When cholera returned seventeen years later, the government declined initially to extend the same degree of religious recognition. In spite of apparently strong public demand for a day of national humiliation and prayer, the official response was limited to thanksgiving once the epidemic declined. By the time of the third epidemic in 1853/4, the popular demand for national religious gestures was, with the notable exception of the Edinburgh Presbytery, much reduced and both official and local events which were held received less publicity [11]. This variation in the official religious response has to be seen within a context in which overall levels of interest in cholera, both official and popular, and its importance in terms of other public interventions, notably in the realm of public health, remained high. In reducing the level of its religious response to what remained a momentous public concern, society can be said to have reacted in a more secular manner, demonstrating the "diminished social significance of religion" described by some secularization theorists [12]. The problems of defining the term "secularization" and the range of meanings already attributed to it will be more fully explored in the next section.

Before entering this controversial area, however, it can be noted that sufficient evidence of contemporary concern about the decline of religion during the midcentury years is available to justify exploring the relevance of secularization hypotheses at that time. The religious census of 1851 revealed a level of church attendance which fell far short of contemporary expectations. Horace Mann's commentary on the results suggested that defaulters were largely from the urban working classes: the "sadly formidable proportion of habitual

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[11] Palmerston's reply to the request of the Edinburgh Presbytery is reprinted in Appendix A.

[12] B Wilson in Religion in a Secular Society (1966) p.xiv and elsewhere, defines secularization as a diminishing of the social significance of religion.

neglecters of the public ordinances of religion" were drawn, he said, from amongst the skilled and unskilled labourers and miserable denizens of city slums [13]. Bishops' Charges at the midcentury reveal a concern with prevailing irreligion which predates publication of the 1851 census results, many of those delivered in 1849/50 containing advice to the clergy on how to overcome the educational and social barriers which were presumed to be responsible for the decline. John Bird Sumner for example, in his first Charge from Canterbury in 1849, deplored the "ignorance of religion even in regular church-attenders", and recommended that clergy make more use of informal conversation rather than formal sermons to impart religious understanding. Also in 1849, Archdeacon John Sinclair warned against the secularizing effect of inappropriate education for the working classes, and stressed the need to reverse the existing trend towards indifference and ignorance in these classes [14]. And in 1850 the Bishop of Ripon, CT Longley, reiterated the need for Christian education to inculcate the creeds and clear beliefs which would protect the lower classes against later infidelity [15]. On the other hand, William Conybeare's contemporaneous comment on the state of religion shows an awareness that the problem was in reality more widespread [16]. Infidelity, he said, was not solely a feature of the lower classes but prevalent amongst the highest ranks to an extent incredible twenty years earlier. In his view, "the tide had turned" a decade earlier, and the religious reaction against "fashionable scepticism" was now in reverse. From this sample of informed contemporary opinion it is clear that serious concern about the nation's religious state existed before the 1851 census provided what was taken to be convincing evidence of decline in the practice of religion.

The study of secularization has tended to be the preserve of sociologists

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[13] Horace Mann, Census of Great Britain 1851: Religious Worship in England and Wales (1854): (Extract in Edward Royle, Radical Politics 1790-1900: Religion and Unbelief, 1971, p.91-2.

[14] Charge of 1849 (London).

[15] Charge of 1850 (Ripon).

[16] William J Conybeare, Church Parties p.97. Conybeare, 1815-57 (Vicar of Axminster) published this article anonymously in Edinburgh Review (cc) (October 1853).

rather than historians, but as Bruce [17] and Chadwick [18] have pointed out, an historical input is essential, not only to anchor theory more securely within an empirical framework but, more compellingly, because an historical and empirical approach follows from recognition that secularization is not a unitary process; the causes and mechanisms of secularization are determined by the specific circumstances of different social groups and individuals at different times and in different places. This also emerged as one of the main findings of McLeod's detailed comparison of three cities during the late nineteenth century. From the different patterns of change associated with each of the cities studied, he concluded that specific historical factors were more important in explaining the secularization process than any "master factor" such as modernization or industrialization [19].

Unfortunately, historical studies of secularization have suffered from the lack of a sound theoretical base. Unresolved conceptual problems have compounded methodological weaknesses and the practical difficulties of measurement in this field. Progress has been impeded by the impossibility of building on earlier work, or comparing and combining results of studies when different theoretical approaches have resulted in different phenomena being measured. In a recent assessment of the current state of the secularization debate the sociologist Bryan Wilson pointed out that definition of terms still remains a stumbling block [20]. There is also a continuing confusion between the explanatory and the descriptive use of the term secularization. By some investigators secularization is seen as one of several possible explanations for declining church attendance, while for others the changed behaviour actually defines the concept.

In addition to conceptual problems, historical research into secularization has to contend with serious practical and methodological difficulties. While few

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[17] S Bruce, ed, Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis (Oxford 1992) p.6.

[18] Owen Chadwick, The Secularization of the European Mind, (Cambridge 1975), Introduction and *passim*.

[19] H McLeod, "Secular cities?" in Religion and Modernization, (1992), p.84.

[20] B Wilson, "Reflections on a many-sided controversy" in Religion and Modernization (1992) p.195.

researchers in this field would admit to limiting their view of secularization to institutional decline, this is not reflected in research so far carried out. In fact, most of those who have addressed the problem of definition accept that the essence of secularization lies in declining religious belief rather than the outward practice of religion. Bruce, for example, has recently confirmed his view that "secularization primarily refers to the beliefs of people" [21]. Gilbert makes a clear distinction between religious belief and practice, and stresses the centrality of a diminishing sense of the supernatural in the secularization process [22]. Even Wilson, the originator of the much-used definition of secularization, placed "religious thinking" ahead of religious practice and religious institutions in specifying areas in which secularization is manifested. But nonetheless, in practice, most studies have relied solely upon charting change in religious institutions; declining church membership, church building and financial standing and above all, church attendance, have been used repeatedly as the main indicators of secularization [23]. Membership and attendance are especially widely used even though, as Wilson among others has pointed out, neither of these measures is as useful or objective as is often assumed. Across the range of past and present religious institutions, church membership has taken a wide variety of forms, its significance varying enormously between different denominations and sects. Nor is church attendance a unitary concept which can be regarded as equally valid a measure of commitment for all religious bodies; attending church services clearly has different meanings in different social and ecclesiastical contexts.

Present knowledge of secularization is thus largely derived from institution-based measures which may bear only an indirect and sometimes misleading relationship to intrinsic religiousness. No doubt the failure to address more relevant aspects of secularization is at least in part due to the fact that ideas are intangible, and religious ideas are especially difficult to measure. If this is the case when

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[21] S Bruce, Religion and Modernization (1992), p.6.

[22] A D Gilbert, "Secularization and the future" in S Gilley and W J Sheils, eds, A History of Religion in Britain, (Oxford 1994), p.518.

[23] Examples of this are studies by Gill, Currie et al, Bruce, Brown, McLeod, Cox, whose works appear in the bibliography.

living subjects are available for interview, as was apparent in Abercrombie's study of contemporary attitudes [24], it is not surprising that historical researchers have failed to incorporate this dimension into their work. It will be argued, however, that this failure is the result not only of these practical difficulties, but also arises from the nature of the secularization thesis itself. Meanwhile, there is no doubt that the problem of measurement of religious belief remains to be solved.

One approach to these methodological problems in the study of secularization, hitherto ignored, has been suggested by Owen Chadwick in a collection of lectures which does not even appear in the bibliographies of most works in the field. As an historian of ideas, Chadwick identified the essence of the broad process referred to as "the secularization of the European mind", to be a diminished "sense of providence" [25]. To illustrate how assumptions regarding the nature of a providential presence in the world had changed, Chadwick compared clerical responses to three shipwreck disasters in late Victorian and Edwardian England. Although there was no attempt in these lectures to pursue this idea in depth, he demonstrated the potential of an intellectual-historical approach to the study of secularization. There are clear advantages to be gained from narrowing the subject of study from religious decline in general, to changes in the status or value of a single concept, the idea of providence. The history and diversity of this concept which can be regarded as central to religious belief, will be explored in greater depth in the following section. As the newspaper extracts quoted above show, the role of providence in the nineteenth-century epidemics was a prominent and much debated issue; cholera therefore provides a promising context in which to investigate evidence of change in an idea integral to religious belief.

In summary, the aim of the present study is to describe the changing religious interpretations of cholera during the twenty-four year period of the first three epidemics in order to deduce, from written and reported responses to cholera by a wide cross-section of society, developments in underlying ideas and attitudes which determine an individual's world view. It is hypothesised that changing ideas

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[24] N Abercrombie et al, "Superstition and religion", Sociological Yearbook of Religion 3 (1970), p. 93-129.

[25] Chadwick, The Secularization of the European Mind, Chapter 10 and *passim*.

about the nature and extent of providential action in relation to epidemic disease can provide an index of the wider process of secularization of thought, and thus contribute to the secularization debate. Surveys of attitudes over a specific time span also provide an appropriate context in which to explore the relevance and explanatory power of concepts derived from the broad secularization thesis.

Other aspects of secularization to which an empirical study can contribute include an assessment of the relative importance of social and economic, as opposed to intellectual, causal factors in religious decline. The question of whether social or intellectual history is more appropriate in the study of secularization was raised by Chadwick in the seminal lectures cited above, but this has not been pursued by more recent commentators. Chadwick concluded that the balance hitherto favours the social historical approach, but that "without the intellectual enquiry, the social enquiry is fated to crash" [26]. However, in one of the few historical studies in the field, "ideas generated by the Victorian intellectual revolution" were dismissed with little examination as too simplistic an explanation for religious decline in nineteenth-century England [27]. The fact that religious changes have bridged national boundaries shows that particular economic, social and political conditions can be subordinate to a transcending mood or idea in influencing religious consciousness. The evangelical revival is an example of major religious change at an international level, and similarly, secularization can be seen to have an international element. Although more ambivalent on this issue, McLeod has acknowledged the "flow of ideas" to be the primary cause of religious change, claiming that social and economic forces merely controlled the conditions in which ideas flourished rather than being themselves the moulders of religious change [28]. More recently, however, he has emphasised the importance of specific local political, economic and social conditions as opposed to more general

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[26] Chadwick, Secularization of the European Mind, p.14.

[27] J Cox, The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1914, (Oxford 1982) p.8.

[28] H McLeod, Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City, (1974) p.284.



factors in generating religious change [29]. McLeod has also pointed to the disagreement between historians as to the timing of religious change in nineteenth century England [30], indicating a further area to which a detailed longitudinal study - such as is here proposed - could usefully contribute.

The boundaries of this study were defined by the dates of the first three cholera epidemics. The years 1831 to 1854 encompass a period of great social, political and economic change which, it is suggested, was also one of significance for religious consciousness. The fourth epidemic has not been included because by 1866 cholera cannot be regarded as presenting a stimulus comparable with the disease of earlier outbreaks. On its fourth appearance it was clearly perceived in an entirely different light; contemporary newspaper coverage showed that it was barely newsworthy, arousing less interest than the cattle plague which struck in 1865. By the 1860s improvements to London's water supply had dramatically reduced the impact of water-borne epidemics in the capital. National mortality figures for the four epidemics show the risk of dying was considerably lower by 1866, justifying the more confident public attitude:

Table 1.1: Cholera Deaths in Britain 1831-66

year	deaths	approximate duration
1831/2	21,882	15 months
1848/9	55,201	18 months
1853/4	24,516	18 months
1866	14,378	- - -

Source: "Cholera deaths in Britain 1831-66" from R J Morris, Cholera 1832, p.13.

The methodology adopted enables both longitudinal and cross-sectional comparisons to be made, the aim being to cover as broad a range of contemporary opinion at each episode as could be satisfactorily pursued within the time available for this study. Systematic sampling of source material was restricted to the duration of each epidemic, as perceived by the publications in question, but

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[29] McLeod, "Secular Cities?" (1992) p.84-6: "The De-Christianisation of the working class in Western Europe 1850-1900", Social Compass, 27 (1980), p.196.

[30] H McLeod, Religion and Irreligion in Victorian England: How Secular was the Working Class? (Bangor 1993) p.9-12.

religious attitudes which seemed particularly pertinent have also been included from outside these time limits where they illustrate longer term trends or help to explain, or contrast with, opinions during the epidemics themselves. This was especially apposite in the case of medical and missionary material.

Cholera was a sufficiently alarming topic to elicit a response from virtually every section of the population. However, it was necessary to select sources which would allow cross-sectional comparisons between identifiable social groups to be made at each succeeding outbreak, as well as enabling longitudinal trends over the twenty-four year period to be revealed. Also, since this is an attempt to gauge the changing consensus of opinion, the focus has been upon larger and more representative sections of society at the expense of smaller and less mainstream groups, such as Roman Catholics, secularists and ethnic minorities. The views of those most closely involved with cholera, the clergy and the medical profession, were, unsurprisingly, the best documented. Great efforts were made to include working-class views but the search in regional archives and libraries for original domestic missionary material was less rewarding. More detailed discussion about the sources and methodological issues will appear in the relevant chapters.

The first part of the thesis, Chapter 2, is an analysis of the key concepts of providence and secularization. This is followed by three chapters which depict different sections of public opinion by means of an analysis of appropriate "media" sources. Chapter 3 presents the results of surveying a sample of national and provincial newspapers which carried the views of a broad section of educated middle-class society in their correspondence columns, and also comprised a record of what these readers were exposed to in frequent authoritative editorials on cholera. Chapter 4 attempts a similar assessment of a survey of religious periodicals covering a wide range of religious opinion, where correspondence and editorial views contribute to the overall picture of how committed subscribers to religious publications responded to the epidemics. Chapter 5 is also a "media" survey but of more limited scope, based on the mission magazines and journals of the main domestic mission societies. It also attempts to tap the responses of less literate sections of society necessarily excluded from other literature surveys; mission journals and magazines often recorded the views of the poor visited by the

missionaries, as well as providing insight into the largely working-class missionaries' own opinions.

The following three chapters move from the general public to focus on the professionals most directly involved in the epidemics, doctors, clergymen and clerical sanitarians. Chapter 6 carries the responses of sections of the medical profession in letters, lectures and articles; since these are almost entirely public utterances, they also provide a record of what the educated public heard and read as expert opinion. Chapter 7 presents what the clerical profession preached from the pulpit on the subject of cholera, revealing the range of doctrinal opinion as well as including some of the personal views of individual clergymen. Again, this source provides a record of what opinions large congregations were exposed to at a critical time. Chapter 8 is a case study, in which the views of a special clerical subgroup are investigated in order to explore the interface between the religious and medical/sanitarian views of epidemic disease. Chapter 9 presents the overall conclusions and reflects on their implications for further research.

## Chapter 2

### PROVIDENCE AND SECULARIZATION

Before examining the nature and extent of the association popularly perceived between cholera and divine providence, a review of the history of this idea within the Christian tradition and of its relationship with secularization is necessary. The main areas of contemporary debate in which ideas of providence were explicitly invoked will also be outlined in order to set the twenty-four year period of the midcentury epidemics in a wider intellectual context. While reactions to cholera reveal that the idea of providence still occupied a central place in contemporary world views, aspects of this response suggest that countervailing ideas had begun to affect such attitudes before the end of the mid-century cholera episode.

The concept of providence is usually regarded as fundamental to a religious view of the world. It has featured in the theological thought of most major religions, and for Christianity especially is an essential element. The word is derived from the Latin "providentia" meaning foresight or foreknowledge, but from its earliest use by the Stoics there seems to have been the additional element of beneficence, leading to the notion of prescient and benevolent government implied in modern usage. The idea of providence was not current in the earliest period of Jewish thought, but was developed later in the teachings of the prophets and psalmists. As Elliott-Binns has pointed out, such a notion was inconceivable until the concept of a universal deity had replaced the local gods of earlier Jewish cosmology [1]. The Old Testament creation story itself implies continuing care and providence as well as explaining the original creative act. The idea of divine control over individuals as well as over mankind and nature as a whole was a later development, appearing in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Elliott-Binns notes that the idea of providence was preferred by the Hebrews over that of chance or fate even before the concept of an after-life became widely accepted.

Within Christianity, providence has commonly been used as a synonym for the supreme Being who governs mundane affairs, but also denotes the pattern of

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[1] L E Elliott-Binns, Divine Providence and Human Destiny, (1943) p.3-14.

that government, the order of the universe. In the latter sense is included both the all-pervading "general providence" or maintenance of cosmic order through fixed laws, and also "particular providence", the parental care bestowed on every minute element of creation. Providential control is exerted both by means of universal natural laws and through "extraordinary" or "immediate" acts of providence not constrained by physical laws. A further elaboration of providential theory exists in the tradition of "peculiar" or "special" providences. Peculiar providences are not miracles, in that there is no obvious violation of physical law, but special events with normal secondary causes by means of which divine judgement can be bestowed.

While the idea of providence is central to Christian thought, and divine purpose is the dominant theme throughout the Bible, the word itself rarely appears in the New Testament. Biblical authority for the later Christian concept has frequently been derived from Matthew where even a sparrow's fall is held to be under divine cognizance [2]. This text featured in many sermons delivered during the epidemics. In a London sermon of 1849, for example, it was quoted to support the argument that cholera was the work of general providence, a manifestation of "God's spirit abroad over the mighty compass of the universe, maintaining order and harmony through the laws of nature", rather than of His "particular providence" directed upon specific individuals. The sermon proceeded to assert that biblical texts, such as this from Matthew, were needed to reveal the truths of particular providence, while the action of general providence can be deduced by the power of reason alone [3]. As will later become clear, this sermon's exposition was but one of the many interpretations of the role of providence in the epidemic of 1849.

Much of the body of Protestant theological thought on providence was developed by English Puritan theologians from the teachings of Calvin and Luther. The Puritan concept of providence combined the two distinct attributes of total prescience and absolute omnipotence; God was both the creator and perpetual

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[2] Matthew 10 v 29-31.

[3] Sermon by John E Cox at Bishopsgate, 1 July 1849.

activator, controlling not only the world at large, but also the fate of each individual. Every event was seen to be invested with meaning and purpose which it was the Christian's duty to decipher. This led to the intensely analytical and inward-looking habit of mind which characterised early Puritanism, and which survived in diminished form among certain groups of nineteenth century nonconformists. The final decline of this characteristic during the 1830-40s became the focus of the largely autobiographical novels of W Hale White later in the century. Van der Molen has suggested that English Puritans, eager to establish divine sanction for the English church, diverged from Calvin in the extent to which they believed historical and everyday events reveal God's judgements [4]. While Calvin's God was perceived as "vigilant, efficacious and operative", controlling both the general movement of history and every event therein, it was not thought He could be known to humans through His actions, with the sole exception of those revealed in scripture. The English Puritans initiated the tradition of tracing divine purpose through fluctuation in national fortunes. Puritans' minute scrutiny of daily events, and confident deductions of divine favour or judgement therefrom reduced the element of mystery in the divine scheme, and ultimately had the paradoxical effect of secularizing historical explanation. However, Puritans, and Anglicans, both Calvinist and Arminian, shared a common doctrinal base in a providentialism which continued to inform religious thought for at least two more centuries.

By the nineteenth century, the doctrine of providence had become more complicated, combining elements of the religious pessimism of Augustinian and Calvinist theology with the optimistic providentialism associated with the growth of natural theology during the eighteenth century. The Calvinist world, which included certain Anglicans as well as non-conformist groups, remained a vale of tears, and the doctrines of original sin and predestination continued to emphasize God's omnipotence and inscrutability rather than His benevolence. Moral government was administered via providential acts of judgement which could be

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[4] R J Van der Molen, "Providence as mystery, providence as revelation: Puritan and Anglican modifications of Calvin's doctrine of providence", Church History 47 (1978) p.27-47.

visited upon individuals or nations without the constraints of necessary or second causes. The inherent paradox of a doctrine which combined with equal emphasis the will of God and human freedom remained unresolved.

For those subscribing to an alternative world view, influenced by the optimism of natural theology, the beneficence and regularity of nature provided proof of the benevolence as well as the omniscience of the deity. In this well-regulated world divine control was seen to be exercised via predictable physical laws. This idea fostered a concept of providence which had little room or need for special interventions. A compromise position recognised a dichotomy between God's moral and natural government. While in the physical world causal relations were deterministic and invariable, in the "school of life", natural events could be used to reward and punish and so teach morality: natural law thus remained the servant and not the master of God. However, as scientific advances during the middle decades of the nineteenth century steadily enlarged the domain of events explicable by physical laws, so reducing the scope for providential interventions, these different conceptions of providence became increasingly polarised.

Interventionist ideas did not die out however, nor were they entirely restricted to isolated dissenting sects. During the midcentury period many orthodox figures, including prominent Anglicans such as Shaftesbury, Gladstone, Thomas Arnold, and Hannah More, as well as the enthusiastic evangelicals [5] of the Recordist set, continued to see God's hand in both individual and national events [6]. As will later be shown, interventionist providential interpretations were to achieve great prominence during the second cholera epidemic of 1848/9.

These different strands of providentialism continued to coexist at the centre of religious thought during the mid-nineteenth century years, and, it has been suggested, influenced perceptions and attitudes far beyond the purely religious arena. In the field of economics, for example, Boyd Hilton has proposed that the

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[5] In this study, the term "evangelical" is used to characterize views and proponents thereof without implication of membership of church denomination or party.

[6] "Recordist set" was used to indicate adherence to the extreme evangelical views promoted by The Record.

contrasting conceptions of divine providence held by different evangelicals led to the adoption of very different social and economic policies during this period [7]. In The Age of Atonement Hilton seeks to establish a relationship between a belief in an interventionist deity and a paternalistic/interventionist social policy on the one hand, and between a more remote general providence and laissez-faire economics on the other. The refusal of the latter group, described by Hilton as "moderate evangelicals", to intervene to relieve even the most urgent and distressing cases of poverty is thus explained by their reluctance to disrupt the system designed by a omniscient and beneficent providence. However, as Hilton points out, the plausibility of a direct causal relationship between specific religious beliefs and behaviour in other departments of life has been disputed. Kitson Clark, for example, finds it inconceivable that powerful religious beliefs do not influence how men behave in "temporal affairs", while Edward Norman considers it more likely that social/economic theory is determined by political and economic ideas current in the wider society, which is then justified or rationalised by clerical policy-makers in religious terms [8]. In arguing that a shift in moral perspectives was more effective in shaping economic policies than developing economic theory, Hilton has established a considerable body of evidence for a causal relationship between the holding of specific religious doctrines and adoption of certain types of social policy. Supporting evidence for this was also found in the views of nineteenth century Positivists. During this period, Positivists campaigning for social reform argued that prevailing providential doctrine was directly responsible for allowing the perpetuation of conservative social policies which blocked necessary change.

In another area of intellectual activity, the world of science, where the influence of religious ideas has also been much debated, the relationship between protestantism and scientific advance is widely accepted [9]. However, the

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[7] Boyd Hilton, The Age of Atonement, (Oxford 1988), Chapter 2 and *passim*.

[8] G Kitson Clark, The English Inheritance 1950, p.10; E R Norman, Church and Society in England 1770-1970, (Oxford 1976) p.12.

[9] This question is well documented by J H Brooke, Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives (Cambridge 1991) Chapter 3, and J Viner, The Role of Providence in the Social Order, (Philadelphia 1972) Chapter 1.



influence of specific providential ideas upon scientific thought has received less attention. Viner's finding that Calvinists were underrepresented among those prominent in scientific achievement in the seventeenth century could support the thesis that particular providential views were incompatible with "good science" [10]. On the other hand it could indicate something about the social/economic background of seventeenth century scientists rather than their religious beliefs. However, Viner did find a relationship between scientific achievement and lapsed Calvinism among the scientists he investigated, suggesting that providential outlook was indeed a relevant factor in seventeenth century scientific creativity. Unfortunately, Viner does not provide evidence on whether the scientific activity preceded or followed the abandoning of Calvinism.

There seems little doubt that for eighteenth-century scientists, the perception of order in the natural world, and so the formulation of physical laws, was facilitated by an optimistic providential outlook [11]. This in turn reinforced a conception of a benevolent designer and maintainer of order. Walter Cannon has shown the continuing importance of this aspect of providential thought in the scientific debates about the creation of species in the 1830s [12]. From the different approaches to this question taken by two eminent scientists of this period, William Whewell and Baden Powell, it is clear that these ideas continued to preoccupy scientists during the mid-century years.

Described by Viner as "a convinced and assiduous exponent of the role of Providence in physical and social phenomena", William Whewell explicitly denied that scientific advance led to "final" or providential causes declining in acceptability [13]. In physiology, for example, he held that "the doctrine of Final Causes has been not only consistent with the successive types of discovery but has been the great instrument of every step of discovery from Galen to Cuvier"

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[10] Viner, The Role of Providence p.26.

[11] Evidence for this view is provided by J Viner and J H Brookes among others.

[12] W Cannon, "The problem of miracles", Victorian Studies, 4(1) (1960) p.5-32.

[13] William Whewell, 1794-1866, mathematician and scientist, published widely in science, philosophy and theology, including one of the Bridgewater Treatises, 1833.

[14]. He admitted that scientific progress led to revision of earlier theological explanations, but did not see this as a problem: "the role of Providence is not in particular events but in the general pattern and interrelationships" of occurrences in the natural world. However, he never renounced his belief that the origin of life and creation of species were essentially miraculous and thus "not within the range of geology's legitimate territory", thus the harmony which Whewell believed to exist between science and religion depended on imposing limits to scientific investigation.

Baden Powell shared Whewell's view that there need be no conflict between science and religion, but in his case this was dependent upon the willingness of theology to adapt to scientific advance, and his view of science entailed greater independence from theology than allowed by Whewell [15]. He did not, for example, subscribe to Whewell's view of the supernatural nature of the origin of life: Powell expected that all aspects of the natural world would eventually be understood in terms of second causes, even those mechanisms by which God had created life. He was confident that wherever they may lead, the revelations of geology "tend to exalt our ideas of the eternal and overruling Omnipotence by whose agency they were brought about" [16]. For Powell it was the regularity of nature, not its apparent mystery, which revealed the existence of God. His concept of providential action thus allowed a more extensive role for purely secular mechanisms in the divine scheme than did Whewell's, which always retained an element of the miraculous at its core.

It is clear, these differences notwithstanding, that for both men providential and scientific ideas were closely interrelated, though the extent and direction of the causal relationship between them is less obvious. There seems little doubt that

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[14] This and the following quotations appear in Viner, The Role of Providence, Chapter 4.

[15] Baden Powell, 1796-1860, Savilian Professor of Geometry at Oxford and Latitudinarian churchman, was a prolific author in science, theology and philosophy. His intellectual career is the subject of Pietro Corsi, Science and Religion: Baden Powell and the Anglican Debate (Cambridge 1988), which has provided material for this chapter.

[16] Quoted in Corsi, Science and Religion, 1988, p.228.

their religious thinking was affected by scientific developments since both were led to reconsider and refine their conceptions of providential action in the light of new discoveries. Indeed, developments in physiology led Powell to hold an entirely new view of biblical authority as restricted to moral truths, and to acknowledge that all other knowledge can only be derived from the study of nature [17].

But it also seems probable that providential assumptions coloured and limited their interpretation of the findings of geological and biological science, though this is difficult to establish in pre-Darwinian England where the traditional interdependence of science and religion still flourished. This tradition, fostered by the alliance of English empiricism and natural theology was not seriously challenged until the publication of The Origin of Species in 1859. It then became clear that religious preconceptions continued to exercise a dominant influence in the responses of both scientists and laymen, preventing for many years a wide acceptance of the Darwinian idea of evolution by natural selection. Most naturalists still assumed a supernatural first cause in the creation of species, long after purely secular mechanisms for species dispersion and extinction had become accepted [18]. Powell, however, having long envisaged that a naturalistic explanation for the creation of species would emerge, did not share this difficulty and gave a warm welcome to The Origin of Species. This might seem to be an instance of religious conviction being overturned by scientific evidence, but Corsi has shown that Powell's response was not based on an assessment of the new evidence so much as a restatement of his earlier views on development from the 1830s [19]. Thus it is not clear that he appreciated how far Darwinian evolution by natural selection diverged from earlier theories of transmutation in eliminating entirely the need for supernatural involvement, and whether, had he lived longer, he would have found further theological accommodation possible.

Ellegård's analysis of the response to Darwin's work has shown the

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[17] Corsi, Science and Religion p.228, suggests that Powell's scientific views underwent less change during his life than his theological tenets, which were constantly revised.

[18] This was the assessment of the American biologist Asa Gray, quoted in A Ellegård, Darwin and the General Reader (Göteborg 1958) p.14.

[19] Corsi, Science and Religion, p.274.

continuing prominence of providential ideas in debates more than a decade later [20]. He concluded that the most serious conflict between Darwinism and religion arose not from the threat to biblical authority but on the more fundamental level of providential doctrine. While the idea of development or evolution in the organic world had by then become familiar and acceptable to many sections of opinion, the theory of natural selection was still almost universally rejected. Acceptability of the different elements of Darwinian theory was clearly related to their compatibility with traditional ideas of design and purpose in the natural world. In fact, the implications of natural selection were not appreciated by the wider public, and discussion in the popular press was often limited to the discrepancies between the biblical and evolutionary accounts of creation. In the more serious periodicals however, the fundamental problem raised by the theory of natural selection for any sort of teleological view of nature was fully recognised. Ellegård's account of the debate pursued in the periodical press shows that many were willing to accept Darwinian evolution if, by reinterpreting Darwin's findings or by modifying conceptions of providential action, some residual scope for divine involvement could be salvaged. A role for providence, analogous to that of man as breeder of animals, was suggested, whereby the selection of successful variations remained under divine control.

Alternatively, it was proposed that providence acted as the manipulator of the different systems of natural laws in order to determine outcome. The existence of gaps in Darwin's arguments allowed some to reserve that part of the natural world still unprovided with convincing secular explanations as a domain where providential rule would always pertain. Others accepted the preeminence of physical law but maintained that since all laws were originally devised by God, the cosmos was fundamentally unaltered by Darwin's work. A further variant of this theme insisted that God had foreseen all and had created the original germ of all necessary development, thereby predetermining the whole course of evolution as illuminated by Darwin.

While it was recognised by the more perceptive that "the ever-bearing self-

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[20] Ellegård, Darwin and the General Reader (1958) chapter 7.

development principle is inconsistent with superintending Providence" [21], a few, including Kingsley, positively welcomed the new view. Claiming that "Darwin's work helps mine at every turn", he found that he could maintain faith in "a living immanent ever-working God" within an evolutionary framework. To hold this position it was necessary to ignore the essential element of chance inherent in Darwinian theory - this Kingsley explicitly did in rejecting "the absolute empire of accident" as the antithesis of his providential world [22]. On the other hand there were those who shared the unease expressed by Tennyson in "In Memoriam" long before the "Origin" debates, and who, without clear understanding of the details of evolutionary theory, foresaw that it heralded the demise of traditional Christian precepts.

Paradoxically, Darwinian ideas were perceived as less threatening by Bible-based Christians than by those who derived their faith from natural theology. It will later emerge that this distinction is pertinent to the religious response to cholera. Discrepancies between biblical and scientific accounts of creation had long been recognised and on this level The Origin of Species did not present a new challenge: a faith based solely on the evidence of providence in nature, however, was seriously undermined by the Darwinian world view. Some Calvinist theologians actually welcomed certain aspects of evolution as vindication of their pessimism; their earthly "vale of tears" now seemed more realistic than the optimistic implications of natural theology. Prominent in this group was James McCosh, a Scottish clergyman who had also been conspicuous in the response to an earlier challenge to traditional Christianity from the positivist philosophy of August Comte.

Comte's major work, Cours de Philosophie Positive, which first reached English readers during the 1830s, attracted far less attention than did Darwin's some twenty years later, but was identified by some as the more serious threat to religion. The historian Lewis Diman, among others, regarded Comte's ideas as "the greatest enemy of religion in the nineteenth century", more serious than the growth

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[21] From John Bull 1866, quoted in Ellegård, Darwin and the General Reader.

[22] Charles Kingsley, letter to F D Maurice, in Letters vol.2 (1877) p.171.

of science itself. If the Comtist challenge could be overcome, Diman maintained, there would be no problem in assimilating Darwinism within providential doctrine [23]. Comte was read and discussed by many of the leading thinkers of the midcentury, including Baden Powell, William Whewell, JS Mill, Mary Ann Evans, Jowett, Maurice and Kingsley. While converts to his religion of humanity were very few, many acknowledged the influence of his philosophical and scientific ideas. The implications of positivism for religious thought appear to have been of less interest to Comte's earlier critics, but were brought to the attention of theologians in 1850 by James McCosh [24].

The Method of Divine Government represented McCosh's response to the positivist threat to orthodox providential doctrine, and it initiated an extensive debate amongst theologians, especially in Scotland, where Comtism had many adherents. From his reading of Comte, McCosh realised that the traditional dichotomy between general and special providence placed the whole notion of providence in jeopardy. General providence had come to be equated with what was scientifically explicable, and special providence invoked only when events defied normal expectations. In a developing society, as nineteenth-century Britain preeminently was, the relevance of special providences must inevitably diminish as the explanatory power of science steadily increased. This, he realised, could lead to the unfortunate impression that primitive or superstitious societies were necessarily more devout than advanced societies. He therefore proposed to replace this dual mode of providential action with a single "universal providence" by which all phenomena are controlled, both explicable and inexplicable events being regarded as equally divine elements of a unitary system. Thus, by reducing the number of supposedly divine interventions, science did not harm religion, but on the contrary, became the means of revealing the system of universal providence.

The threat to traditional providential doctrine became the focus of other theological responses to Comte at this time. Some, like Thomas Pearson in his

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[23] C D Cashdollar, The Transformation of Theology 1830-90, (Princeton 1989) p.5-6 and *passim*, discusses the impact of Comte in relation to Lewis Diman's "The theistic argument as affected by recent theories" (1881).

[24] James McCosh, The Method of Divine Government (1850).

essay "Infidelity, its aspects, causes and agencies" [25] counter-attacked with a hostile rebuttal of Comtism *per se*, but others were sympathetic to Comte's criticisms of superstition in religion, and sought to meet them by revision of doctrine. Amongst the latter were Benjamin Jowett and JS Blackie, who were both ready to discard an anthropomorphic conception of the Deity, perceiving providence in the "ordinary" and in the uniformity of nature, rather than in the bizarre or mysterious. These liberal adjustments do not appear to have gained wide acceptance however, and positivism continued to be a problem in theological thought for many decades, featuring as the main subject of a Church Congress as late as 1888.

This outline of the history of providential ideas gives an indication of the complexity of the concept of providence and its continuing centrality in the religious thought of mid-nineteenth century England. While it was evidently still at the heart of prevailing world-views, it is clear that various modes of thought antipathetic to providentialism were beginning to impinge upon public consciousness before the decisive effects of Darwin's thought were felt later in the century. The coincidence of theological debates involving providence and the arrival of cholera must be assumed to have stimulated and influenced popular responses to the epidemics: the interaction of these currents of thought will be explored in greater depth in the following chapters. Before examining the evidence for the sort of qualitative change detected by Chadwick later in the century, and the significance that any diminution in quality or intensity of a sense of providence bears for a wider decline in religion, the concept of secularization and its place in historical research will be briefly reviewed in order to relate previous work to the present study and clarify how the concept will be used here.

### Secularization

The study of secularization is beset with semantic and methodological problems. A brief survey of the literature is sufficient to reveal the range of different meanings ascribed to this term and the variety of contexts in which it has been applied,

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[25] Published in 1853.

ranging from the intellectual development of an individual to institutional changes affecting society as a whole. In addition to problems of definition, research in this area has suffered from the category error of using secularization both as description and as explanation for phenomena associated with religious decline. This tendency to reify the concept from a description into a cause may in fact have been more of a hindrance than imprecision of definition. If, as has been suggested by one theorist, current definitions of secularization and religion are in fact "no more ambiguous than the processes to which they refer", a more refined terminology would be of little use in interpreting the essential ambiguities in this area [26]. Nonetheless, the existence of unresolved conceptual problems, and the lack of agreement between different theorists as to the nature and boundaries of their subject, render a satisfactory overview of the field difficult.

Gilbert has traced the changing use of the word secularization from the thirteenth century to the present, noting that it was in the later nineteenth century when used to describe phenomena such as "infidelity" and "loss of faith", that the term first acquired an explanatory element. Victorian observers then began to see secularization as an intrinsic aspect of modern society [27]. This causal link between secularization and modernization became the foundation of twentieth century sociological theories of religious decline and remained received wisdom until the end of 1960s, when secularization theory, even the idea of secularization itself, came under attack. The earlier theoretical criticisms resulted in a range of negative suggestions, which included abandoning the term as a research tool, denying that the process actually existed, accusations of ideological bias and repeated efforts towards its redefinition [28]. A further objection to the idea of secularization arises from a functionalist view of religion. If religion is regarded as essentially that which gives "ultimate meaning" to existence, then anything which appears to fulfil this function can be regarded as religious. Greeley, for example,

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[26] R K Fenn, Toward a Theory of Secularization, (Storrs, Conn.1978) p.24.

[27] Gilbert, "Secularization and the future" (1994) p.505.

[28] Examples of these positions can be found in the following: H Shiner "The concept of secularization in empirical research" in Journal of Scientific Study of Religion vi(2) 1967 p.207-20 ; Peter Glasner, The Sociology of Secularization (1977); David Martin, The Religious and the Secular (1969).



postulates that a "built-in strain towards evolving an ultimate meaning system and making it sacred" is an enduring part of the human condition [29]. With this view of religion, any apparent decline in religious activity will be interpreted as merely a change in the mode of expression rather than a real diminishing of religiosity. A similar position is derived from the Stark/Bainbridge theory of religion as a "constant economy"; this proposes that religion exists to satisfy basic and permanent social and psychological needs. As long as these needs persist religion cannot disappear, though its form may be expected to change as society develops [30]. These theoretical objections to secularization theory have been answered effectively by Gilbert [31] and by Bruce and Wallis [32] among others. The most persuasive argument against adopting such a broad view of religion is that it establishes by definition the very issue which needs empirical demonstration. Gilbert also emphasises the need for a term to reflect common and past usage if patterns of change or continuity in the past are to be detected. Generally, it is argued that overinclusive definitions of religion will tend to obscure rather than clarify the nature of religious change. Furthermore, scientific economy demands that if there is indisputable evidence of decline in any area of overtly religious behaviour, the onus is upon the proposers of the "fund of religiosity" hypothesis to demonstrate its validity by showing that religion is indeed flourishing outside the conventional religious frameworks in an apparently more secular society.

There have also been a number of empirically-based objections to the secularization thesis, but unfortunately much of both criticism and defence relies on twentieth-century evidence and cannot necessarily contribute to understanding secularization in nineteenth century England, the subject of the present study. As several of the earliest critics of the secularization thesis pointed out, religion is not a unitary concept. Great variation in the nature of religious commitment can exist

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[29] A M Greeley, The Persistence of Religion (1973) p.241.

[30] R Stark & W S Bainbridge, "Towards a theory of religion" Journal for Scientific Study of Religion 19 (1980), p.114-28.

[31] A D Gilbert, The Making of Post-Christian Britain (1980) Chapter 1; "Secularization and the future" (1994) p.507-509.

[32] R Wallis and S Bruce, "Secularization, the orthodox model" (1992) p.25-27.

even within the context of a single religious group, so no simple model of religious decline should be expected to be universally applicable [33]. It is clearly inappropriate to attempt a refutation of secularization in nineteenth-century England on the basis of twentieth-century American evidence, even though comparisons of decline between different societies at different times may sometimes yield useful insights into the processes involved. This does not seem to be sufficiently appreciated by either side in the secularization debate. Gilbert, for example, in his defence of the secularization thesis, clearly recognises the complex nature of religion and hence that of secularization, and gives emphasis to the variety of ways in which people are religious and can become less so, but at the same time appears to assume a continuity in the secularizing process from the nineteenth into the late twentieth century which may not pertain [34]. Similarly Wilson, who as a sociologist has adopted a wider definition of religion and secularization than embraced by historical researchers, has used a variety of examples from several continents across a number of centuries to counter historical objections to the secularization thesis [35]. Although Wilson's theoretical approach to the subject is primarily that of a sociologist, he has made specific suggestions for increasing the range of variables for future research in the field, which might be usefully applied by historians of secularization. These include making more extensive use of church indices, such as confirmation rates, clergy stipends, donations to religious bodies, as well as the power and influence wielded in society by ecclesiastical institutions.

It may be too early to expect results from these suggestions but there is no doubt that, hitherto, empirical evidence of religious decline in the nineteenth century has been somewhat limited in scope. In fact, one historian in the field, Callum Brown, has asserted that the secularization thesis has only survived thus far because of the poor quality and quantity of empirical research. In what he described as a "revisionist" criticism of secularization theory, Brown attacked the

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[33] eg M Marty, The Modern Schism (1969) and Peter Glasner, The Sociology of Secularization (1977) Chapter 1.

[34] Gilbert, "Secularization and the future" (1994).

[35] Wilson, "Reflections on a many-sided controversy" (1992) p.195-210.

inevitability of religious decline in modern societies on both empirical and theoretical grounds, but proposed no alternative model of religious change [36]. His study derived "church adherence" *per capita* for a number of different denominations from 1840 to 1980, and plotted an aggregate figure against a measure of population density. The results led him to conclude that contrary to predictions of the secularization thesis, urbanization and industrialization were associated with a rise rather than a decline in the "social significance of religion" during the Victorian period. There are, however, several aspects of his study which weaken confidence in these findings. First, the measures employed hardly justify the broad conclusions drawn. The "proportion of population in towns of over 20,000 people" seems inadequate as a means of assessing the impact of urbanization and industrialization upon religious behaviour. And "church adherence", as a composite figure covering many different types of membership of a variety of denominations is of doubtful validity or reliability, especially during the long period studied. An uncritical identification of "church adherence" with Wilson's "social significance of religion" is also of dubious utility. A further controversial point in his argument is the use of transatlantic comparisons of church data; the difficulty of interpreting such figures has already been mentioned. In fact his conclusions regarding town size and religious activity have not been supported by Bruce's analysis of census figures [37]. Brown's theoretical criticisms of secularization theory also seem to misfire since the "inevitability" and "irreversibility" of secularization, to which he most objects, have been explicitly excluded, as essential elements of the thesis, in recent elaborations of current views by Bruce [38] and by Gilbert [39].

The same objections to secularization theory were made in a local study of church decline in the nineteenth century by Jeffrey Cox who, like Brown, rejects the secularization thesis as an adequate explanation of social and religious change.

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[36] Callum Brown, "A revisionist approach to religious change", Religion and Modernization (1992) p.31-58.

[37] Bruce, "Pluralism and religious vitality" (1992) p.170-95.

[38] Wallis and Bruce, "Secularization: the orthodox model" (1992) p.8-31.

[39] Gilbert, "Secularization and the future", p.520 and elsewhere.

His study also exemplifies some of the conceptual confusion surrounding this subject referred to earlier. From his statement that "the social changes involved in secularization do not invariably and inevitably lead to the decay of religious ideas and institutions" [40], it is not clear how the term secularization is to be understood. Thus in spite of the extensive documentation of church decline, the study of secularization does not seem materially advanced.

Other attempts to test hypotheses derived from the secularization thesis have been carried out by Finke, Bruce, Gill, Hornsby-Smith (examples of whose work appear under Bruce's editorship [41]), but only a minority are relevant to the study of nineteenth-century secularization. Gill's work on census figures has produced a new hypothesis to account for declining congregations but the negative effects of empty churches are, like the deterrent effect of pew rents, unlikely to play more than a marginal role in explaining secularization. A reversal of the generally accepted relationship between secularization and declining attendance - by which Gill would make empty churches responsible for secularization, instead of *vice versa* - has little persuasive force.

Most of the research reviewed here has been based upon evidence drawn from the institutions of religion, either attendance at services or some version of church/chapel membership. The question arises as to whether the lack of progress in understanding the causes of religious decline is due at least in part to the failure of most research to go beyond such church-related evidence. The need to focus upon underlying religious thought and belief has been admitted by several of the principal figures in the field. For example, Gilbert stresses the centrality of supernatural belief in any definition of religion, and hence of its decline in the secularization process [42]. Finke identifies "individual behaviour, thoughts and beliefs" as one of the three broad areas in which secularization occurs [43]. Bruce goes further, claiming that "secularization primarily refers to the

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[40] Cox, English Churches in a Secular Society, p. 266.

[41] Bruce, editor, Religion and Modernization (1992).

[42] Gilbert, The Making of Post-Christian Britain (1980) Chapter 1; "Secularization and the future" (1994) p.515.

[43] R Finke, "An unsecular America", Religion and Modernization (1992) p.147.

beliefs of people...we take the 'bottom line' of secularization to be changes in the religious beliefs and behaviour of individuals" [44]. Even Wilson's definition of secularization, "the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions" lose social significance appears to give priority to individual mental changes [45]. But in spite of these declarations of intent, in practice, evidence of religious decline has been almost entirely based on church data, and religious thought and belief have generally received insufficient attention in research into secularization.

Although the practical difficulties of historical investigation of religious belief have no doubt contributed to this neglect, it also seems probable that the secularization thesis has failed to generate testable hypotheses at the appropriate level, and that the definition of secularization which has dominated this research is itself part of the problem. An emphasis on "social significance" of religion has perhaps directed attention away from more fundamental aspects of religious decline. There is no doubt that the secularization debate remains inconclusive, neither objectors nor defenders of the thesis having made significant advances in the field. In some ways it seems that the debate about secularization theory has been a distraction from the primary task of investigating religious decline, a phenomenon not really in dispute. It therefore seems appropriate to examine alternative approaches to the subject.

Reservations about some aspects of secularization research have been expressed by one of the foremost authorities in this field. McLeod has warned against undue emphasis upon quantitative measures which might obscure rather than reveal the qualitative changes in religious attitudes underlying secularization [46]. He has also cautioned against overdependence upon church attendance data. Such measures cannot be used as indications of assent to particular doctrines, nor to compare "religiosity" of different classes. He also points out that the religious significance of church attendance may often be outweighed by its social

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[44] Bruce, Religion and Modernization (1992) p.6.

[45] Wilson, Religion in a Secular Society (1966) p.xiv.

[46] McLeod, "Secular cities?" (1992) p.85.

and political dimensions [47]. And on the definition of secularization which centres on the loss of social significance of religion, he comments that "it may or may not be associated with a decline in the extent and intensity of individual belief" [48]. This pragmatic approach to the subject provides a model for the present study, which aims to document and seek explanations for the decline in religious belief during the mid-nineteenth century. Rather than an attempt to contribute to the secularization debate *per se*, it is envisaged as a parallel approach to the studies of secularization of thought reviewed above. The history of ideas approach to secularization taken by Owen Chadwick, outlined in the previous section, has provided the stimulus for adopting the idea of providence as the central theme of this thesis.

Following this introductory review of the main themes of the present investigation of nineteenth-century religious thought, the succeeding chapters will present the results of the empirical study of a wide range of contemporary sources.

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[47] H McLeod, "Class, community and religion", Sociological Yearbook of Religion, 6 (1973), p.30.

[48] McLeod, "Secular cities?" (1992) p.64.

## Chapter 3

### THE NEWSPAPER PRESS

Newspapers provide an opportunity to explore fluctuations in the perception of epidemic cholera on a daily or weekly basis, and at the same time to assess its relative importance in the context of other current issues. Editorials and correspondence columns each provide a means of exploring the different ways in which cholera was perceived and responded to during the three epidemics. The content of editorials reflects not only the personal opinion of the particular editor and/or proprietor, but also attitudes seen by them to be prevalent in the readership targeted. Editorial views are also reflected in the selection of correspondence for publication, though of course much can also be learned about attitudes in different sections of society from the individual letters themselves. Discrepancies between editorial and correspondents' views can also be revealing of the ways in which public opinion is formed and modified by this medium. Furthermore, newspapers constitute a record of the ideas and information to which certain definable sections of the public were exposed at specific points in time, and so provide information about the intellectual life of a wider public than the small group of active correspondents and professional writers whose views were published.

This last aspect is relevant to the wider debate about the extent to which newspapers moulded or merely reflected public opinion at this time. It was during these decades that newspapers were emerging from their dependency on the patronage of political parties in order to satisfy the growing public demand for "independent" opinion [1]. This development increased the scope for newspaper writers to reflect their readers', rather than ministerial, opinion, and at the same time increased the power and influence of individual editors. A newspaper editor, suggested Thomas Carlyle, could be regarded as "a ruler of the world, being a persuader of it" [2] and many would have concurred with Greville's judgement that the editor of the most influential paper might well be

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[1] A. Aspinall, Politics and the Press (Brighton 1973) p.380.

[2] London Journal 31 May 1845.

described as "the most powerful man in the country" [3]. While The Times had long cherished a reputation for "self-reliance and independence" and was thought to wield greater influence as a result of its "utter disregard of class-interests and party ties" [4], other papers continued to serve more restricted, and hence more identifiable, social/political groupings.

In order to tap a range of political and social opinion, a sample of national and local newspapers was surveyed to gauge responses to each of the three cholera epidemics of 1831/2, 1848/9 and 1853/4. The publications chosen were the London-based daily newspapers The Times, the Morning Chronicle, the Morning Post, available throughout the twenty-four year period, and local newspapers in Cambridge and Oxfordshire, which provide less complete runs during the cholera period [5]. Of these The Times had by far the largest and most diverse circulation and wielded greater influence than any of its rivals [6]. Conservative in politics, and High Church in religion, it was thought to represent a fair sample of educated opinion of all political views [7]. The Morning Chronicle was its nearest rival, though it never approached similar circulation levels. It was described as liberal/conservative in politics but changed ownership and political complexion in 1848. Its relative failure before that date was attributed to the fact that it "truckled to the Whigs as a party" [8]. After 1848 it supported Peel, favoured state interference, especially in education, and upheld the interests of the labouring poor. The Morning Post, with a circulation of 3500 in 1855, was described as the "leading organ of the aristocracy and fashionable world", with

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- [3] This was said of Thomas Barnes, editor of The Times 1817-41, by Charles Greville in his Journal 1834/5, quoted in Edward Cook, Delane of The Times (1915) p.6.
- [4] Mitchell's Press Directory 1951.
- [5] These included Cambridge Chronicle, Jackson's Oxford Journal, Oxford University, City and County Herald, Oxford Chronicle, Banbury Guardian.
- [6] The Times' circulation in 1855 was 61000.
- [7] Mitchell's Press Directory 1851.
- [8] D F Bostick, "Sir John Easthope and the Morning Chronicle 1834-48" Victorian Periodicals Review xii(2) (1979) p.55.



Tory, High Church and strong protectionist interests [9].

A systematic scrutiny of all editorials and correspondence columns in these papers was carried out for eighteen months from the start of each of the outbreaks to establish the extent to which cholera was perceived in religious terms and to expose any temporal trends in the different ways in which the epidemic was viewed as a providential phenomenon. As a reflection of wider public opinion, published letters cannot be regarded as an unbiased source; it is of course only a probably unrepresentative minority who actually write to the press, and their letters are subject to an unassessable degree of editorial selection. Nonetheless, it seems probable that the volume of correspondence published on a particular subject would have borne some relation to the amount of public interest in it - or at least to editorial perception of public interest. Although this does not allow for comparisons between newspapers, because of wide variation in the space allocated to correspondence, fluctuations in volume and subject matter within a single organ can be useful measures of changing opinion over time. Editorials, on the other hand, are readily comparable in frequency, size and subject matter. However, although editors themselves are identifiable, the writers of the leading articles which define "editorial" opinion remain anonymous. It is known, for instance that during the editorship of Peter and Algernon Borthwick, Disraeli was a frequent leader-writer in the Morning Post, and that under Delane's editorship of The Times, clerical leader writers included such celebrities as Thomas Mozely and Henry Wace but even in the archives of a publication as well-documented as The Times, it is not possible to identify the authors of individual articles before the 1850s. Since, in the case of The Times at least, the leading article was considered to be the medium through which the editor wielded his influence and set the tone of the paper, it has to be assumed that the "governing judgement" of the editor was

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[9] Information from Mitchell's Press Directory 1851; Aspinall, Politics and the Press; Stanley Morison, The English Newspaper (1932); Cook, Delane of The Times; A Ellegård, "Readership of the periodical press" Victorian Periodicals Newsletter 13 (1971) p.3.

constantly exercised [10].

What emerged from the survey was that although there were consistent and to some extent predictable differences in editorial treatment of the subject, there was a remarkable similarity in the pattern of change in responses to the three epidemics. There was more variability between papers in the amount of correspondence on cholera, though by the third epidemic correspondence on cholera declined throughout the sample. These findings make a striking contrast with the results of the survey of religious periodicals to be presented in the following chapter [11]. While the relative lack of interest shown by newspaper editors during 1831/2 may be partly accounted for by the demands of competing political news - the Reform Bill, civil disturbances and rioting, matters of greater interest to national daily newspapers than to religious periodicals - the contrasting pictures during the second and third epidemics suggest more fundamental differences in outlook and motivation germane to this enquiry

#### First cholera outbreak 1831/2

In general, perceptions of the first epidemic were characterised by a calmer less alarmist tone than became common in later years in both editorials and correspondence. In fact, one of the most frequent messages conveyed by editorials at this point was that the new disease was not really as dangerous as early reports from abroad had suggested, was probably not contagious and might even not be a new disease at all, merely a different form of the familiar "English" cholera [12]. From the first The Times attempted to "allay the exaggerated apprehensions" held by the public, and pointed out that no more than one in fifty became victims in the towns involved. The editor declared himself "skeptical" in February, blaming "a disposition to make the most of it" for the exaggerated view prevailing, and even in March remained "doubtful that any really contagious

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[10] Cook, Delane of The Times, p.287; Chadwick, Secularization of the European Mind, p.41; M S Millar and M G Wiebe, "This power so vast and so generally misunderstood: Disraeli and the press in the 1840s", Victorian Periodicals Review, xxv(2) (1992) p.83.

[11] Histograms showing these results are on pages 73-74.

[12] Such comments appeared in The Times editorials on 5 November, 7, 10, 12, December 1831, 21 February 1832.

condition" existed [13]. This tendency to belittle the threat was a characteristic of all newspapers surveyed. The brief and infrequent coverage of the subject during 1831/2 by the Morning Chronicle and the Morning Post is evidence of their lack of serious concern with the epidemic, such limited editorial comments as appeared affirming their dismissive attitude. Thus, the Morning Post held that "inflated ideas" on the dangers of cholera resulted from doctors spreading alarm for their own benefit; cholera was merely an excuse for "filling the pockets of ignorant and impudent pretenders" [14]. And the reprinting by the Morning Chronicle of a placard on display in Lambeth conveyed a similar message, namely that fear of cholera was spread by "a set of half-starved doctors" trying to frighten the nation into spending money: "Cholera humbug! The inhabitants of Lambeth will not be imposed upon by villainously false reports that Asiatic cholera has reached London" [15].

This determination to minimise the threat posed by cholera was not, apparently, incompatible with using the cholera "crisis" as an opportunity to criticise the government. The editors of both The Times and the Morning Post made frequent attacks on the government for its inadequate and inappropriate response to the epidemic, and were especially contemptuous of "the incompetence of this imbecile Board" (of Health) [16]. The impression is given that cholera was seen more as a useful whip with which to beat the government's back than as a subject of concern in its own right.

In keeping with this largely political and practical perception of the first epidemic, the causes postulated and cures suggested, were never at this point exclusively religious or moral in tone. Material factors, such as poverty, inadequate diet, dirty streets and dwellings, were readily acknowledged to be the main causes, and from the start, The Times maintained that more hospital beds and greater attention to cleansing were almost all that were required [17]. And when,

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[13] The Times editorials 18 February, 21 March 1832.

[14] Morning Post 25 February 1832.

[15] Morning Chronicle 17 February 1832.

[16] Editorials in The Times 2 January 1832, 24 February 1832; Morning Post 5 November 1831, 18 February 1832.

[17] The Times 15, 16 February 1832.

rarely, religious ideas were invoked, they were secondary to more practical measures:

By such simple precautions, and through that religious trust in a merciful Providence which never fails to cheer and invigorate the human heart and to prepare the bodily frame itself for a more vigorous encounter with the assaults of sickness...we doubt not that this new and forbidding monster...will in no long time be overpowered [18]

Here cholera seemed to be regarded as a morally neutral calamity, in the same class as other natural disasters, rather than a specific act of divine intervention to warn or to punish. The appropriate response to the threat was therefore confidence through faith rather than repentance or self-abasement. It seems that religious behaviour was encouraged mainly as a sensible precaution for all at a time of high mortality, rather than as a means of winning a reprieve from deserved chastisement. Moral reform of society is seen as a possible after-effect of the epidemic rather than a precondition of its removal; the editorial continued with the expression of:

an earnest hope that...the approach of danger from which no human power can with certainty release mankind may tend to a revival amongst us, where they have been lost, or to the creation where they have never before existed, of habits of sober and conscientious self-enquiry and to consequent resolution of amended life, the most profitable results of all the trials to which in this world it may please the ALMIGHTY to expose His creatures [19]

Thus the religious state of the nation was brought into the debate as a potential beneficiary of the epidemic rather than as the probable cause of its infliction, which was to become one of the dominant interpretations in 1848/9.

The subject of national religious gestures of humiliation and fasting or thanksgiving hardly featured in any of the papers surveyed, suggesting the issue was not at all controversial in the early 1830s, but simply the accepted traditional response to a crisis. The Fast Day in March 1832 therefore passed without editorial comment in any of these papers, though The Times reprinted some of the sermons delivered on the occasion. The only negative comment appeared in the Morning Chronicle's report of the parliamentary debate, and here criticism was

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[18] The Times editorial 5 November 1831.

[19] The Times editorial 5 November 1831.

directed at the over-pious manner of the proposer of the motion, not at the proposal itself [20].

It is clear that during the first epidemic the religious content of editorial comment on cholera was very limited and varied little between the newspapers in this sample. Only the Morning Post, which seemed more aware than others of the importance of sanitary precautions, made the connection between cleanliness and morality. The editor recommended "purification" of the metropolis whether or not cholera visited London. He believed that the habits of cleanliness in the poor were inseparable from their morality, and therefore, whatever the present view of the epidemic, it may, through "the inscrutable ways of providence" turn out to have been a blessing, as the precautionary measures adopted introduced habits of cleanliness among the lower orders, leading to preservation of health and improvement of morals [21]. Although cleanliness is here seen as a moral issue, cholera seems to have been regarded non-judgementally, fitting into a broader providential design which worked, in ways man cannot expect to understand, for his greater good.

Correspondence on cholera during the first epidemic adds little to modify the picture given by editorials in most of this sample. The number of letters on the subject was generally low and mostly pursued the same themes as the editorials, namely belittling the threat, doubting contagion or denying the presence of cholera in their own area. There is little to suggest that individual correspondents tended to a more religious view of cholera than the editors.

The Times on the other hand, which devoted more space to correspondence than other papers, carried a high proportion of letters on the subject of cholera. Perhaps in view of The Times's stronger editorial interest in the topic this is not surprising, though the letters published were not mere reflections of editorial views of the subject. Although many pursued issues frequently aired in editorials, such as contagion, over-reporting, the Asiatic versus English question, a number contributed new information and opened up new areas for debate, including a

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[20] Morning Chronicle 27 January 1832.

[21] Morning Post editorial 14 December 1831.

minority upon religious aspects of the epidemic. These letters are of interest not only for the religious ideas expressed but for the information they contain about aspects of social behaviour which did not emerge clearly elsewhere in this sample. A letter from a doctor which began with a familiar playing-down of the epidemic - mortality is less than reported; if it is Asiatic, is clearly much modified (ie milder) in this country - proceeded on a philosophical level:

although...the invisible and inscrutable **primary** cause of the present epidemic in the North and London is one entirely beyond the control of human means [I remain] convinced that the only effectual measures [lie in] alleviating conditions of the poor...the terror inspired by this disease is derogatory to Christianity...if the opulent were to visit, as they ought to, the miserable abodes of poverty and sickness they would bring home, no contagion, but a consciousness and a certainty of propitiating the Deity much better than by ceremonial fasts and prayers which without good works will assuredly be dispersed in empty air by the all-wise Creator of the universe [22]

This letter touches on many of the dominant issues, including contagion and poverty in relation to cholera, from an explicitly religious viewpoint. The writer's main concerns are to deplore unchristian terror and ritual fasting unaccompanied by practical measures, but, though "propitiation" itself is not seen as inappropriate, he stops short of giving an explicitly religious meaning to the epidemic. A "Unitarian dissenter" was also critical of inappropriate ceremonial gestures and wrote to give his reasons for non-observance of the Fast. He claimed fasting was either hypocritical or misunderstood; he had "reason to apprehend [it was] more a political manoeuvre...to appease the clamours of intolerant faction than a conviction of propriety or expediency" [23]. He also expressed doubts on whether the epidemic really was a divine infliction, doubts which were based not on theological or scientific grounds, but on the fact that cholera was in reality no more devastating than many other diseases. Another letter shared this scepticism about supernatural involvement in epidemics, and, in offering an alternative natural/economic explanation for their existence, appears to show the influence of Malthusian ideas on population. This stands out as one of the very few instances where Malthusian ideas were applied in the context of cholera. The same

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[22] The Times, letter from James Johnson MD, 2 March 1832.

[23] The Times, letter of 26 March 1832.

correspondent also criticised the panic-stricken resort to religion, though without the implication of widespread hypocrisy:

panic is so universal as to demand fasting and prayers from those who seldom address the Deity except for purpose of self-preservation...when we contemplate the intense anxiety created by this epidemic one would be led to suppose that a temporary increase in mortality ... was regarded not only as a national calamity, but as a special interposition of divine Providence! But exuberant population and advancing civilisation will always ... work up occasional epidemic scourges to carry off a portion of its indigent, intemperate and sickly members [24]

Not very much can be deduced about religious perceptions of cholera from such a limited sample. Clearly the small number of letters touching on religion is itself the most telling finding; if this accurately reflects public opinion, it seems that during the first epidemic, political, medical and economic aspects of cholera were of more concern than the spiritual or moral to the letter-writing public. Moreover, the few religiously-motivated correspondents perceived no necessary connection between cholera and divine purpose or providence. While it seems improbable that editorial bias has produced a distorted impression of public religious sentiment at this time, the possibility has to be considered, in view of suspicions voiced about editorial policy in the most debated aspect of cholera, the issue of contagion. Scrutiny of editorials and letters on a daily basis has revealed how frequently certain editorial views, notably on contagion and whether cholera was Asiatic or English, were echoed in the correspondence at around the same time. Was the editor accurately reflecting public opinion on these issues, or was it editorial practice to use the correspondence columns to publicise a favoured point of view in order to influence a wider public and perhaps ultimately, government policy? It was The Times's avowed intention to be "a mirror for educated public opinion" and it had indeed gained the reputation of being "conducted as a weathercock" precisely because of its readiness to follow changes in public mood [25]. But there is no doubt that it also led public opinion. It was widely credited with being the most influential of the daily newspapers, as was affirmed by one of its correspondents in precisely the area in question: "The powerful influence which

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[24] The Times letter from "Argus" 12 March 1832.

[25] Aspinall, Politics and the Press (1973) p.380.

your paper possesses upon the public mind has never perhaps been more beneficially exercised than on the question of cholera". The writer congratulated The Times upon "the change of sentiments produced by your own remarks and correpondents' against the groundless alarm" spread by "the Asiatics". Cholera is **not** a new disease, he concluded, adding, parenthetically, that "no irreverence is intended regarding Fast day" [26]. The powerful influence of The Times had earlier been acknowledged by a correspondent in the Morning Chronicle, though here perceived in a less favourable light as a "baneful" effect. A "habitué" of that publication described how he searched the columns of newspapers for an indication of:

the direction which the public mind would take, from the influence exerted over it by the public press. It is because I think this influence has been a baneful one that I am now writing to you. The Times more particularly has been the vehicle of sentiments, through its own remarks and the letters of correspondents, which have contributed ... however well-intentioned, to disturb the confidence of the people in precautionary measures, and generally to indispose society to make those exertions which the exigency of the case requires for the general good. Let the public be on guard against accepting the doctrines propounded by these ephemeral writers. Let them bear in mind that the higher class of medical man rarely, if ever, enters such lists of strife [27]

While the precise nature of the harmful sentiments is not made explicit, this letter is further evidence that The Times could be perceived as successfully propagating - through both its editorials and correspondence - a particular point of view on the nature of cholera. Certainly its repeated claims to "neutrality" appear unconvincing when hostility towards the contagionists, which formed the basis of its repeated attacks on the Board of Health, was almost the only view of this issue expressed in its pages. Whether or not there was bias in selection of letters published, its comment in February that "we can convey no idea to our readers of the number and contents of the letters we receive on the cholera morbus" [28] was, in the context of a reiteration of the editorial position, (still "doubtful that any really contagious disease exists") clearly an attempt to imply that a consensus of

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[26] The Times letter from Dr David Unwins 24 March 1832.

[27] Morning Chronicle letter 3 March 1832.

[28] The Times editorial 21 February 1832.



correspondents' opinion existed on this point. Following that comment, dissenting letters on the subject were certainly received because two, both from doctors, were then published. A Soho Board surgeon, who complained that all the many letters to The Times had only one view of cholera, ensured publication by challenging the editor to demonstrate his impartiality by so doing. The other letter made a similar charge of publishing one-sided correspondence as well as accusing The Times of holding to a view of contagion without evidence; both letters were published, but received no editorial reply [29].

Although slightly marginal to the central concern with religious perceptions of the epidemic, it is useful to observe this exchange of views on contagion for its bearing on how mechanisms of forming or manipulating public opinion might be applied when other, more religious, ideas came to the fore in the next epidemic.

#### Second cholera epidemic 1848/9

From the response in the national newspapers, cholera seems to have engrossed public attention to a greater degree during the second episode than it had seventeen years earlier. Absence of competition from topics which had dominated the news in the early 1830s - reform and riot - may have some bearing here, but a changed climate of opinion, especially the developing interest in public health, was clearly an important factor. Certain distinctions between the different publications noted in 1831/2 were still evident in 1848. The Times, for example, with its strong interest in free trade, continued hostile to contagion theory, and the Morning Post maintained a critical attitude to the newly formed Board of Health. But the most significant aspect of the editorial response to the second epidemic was common to all, and this was a dramatic, and in some cases, abrupt change in attitude after the summer of 1849.

In the early months of the epidemic, editorial comment was similar in tone to that of 1831/2. There appeared to be little interest in possible religious connotations of the disease and the most common editorial attitude was, as during the first epidemic, a desire to minimise and play down the threat. Reassurance

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[29] The Times letters from G R Mart 17 March 1832, and Thomas Eden 26 March 1832.

offered was justified on several grounds, and as in 1831/2, the one most frequently used was to deny that cholera was contagious. This was the argument again favoured by The Times, whose editor uncharacteristically praised the Board of Health when its latest report reversed the earlier official position on contagion [30]. The editor hailed this "excellent notification" which showed "the once prevalent view of contagion was now discredited", and welcomed the freedom from harmful effects of contagion theory, such as panic-stricken abandonment of the sick. Now that atmospheric causes were held responsible, better ventilation, and other appropriate remedies, such as cleanliness, good air and diet, "within the reach of all", could be applied. Again, on 16 October it was claimed that the results of experience were of a most encouraging kind; now non-contagion had been positively proved, no special hospitals would be needed.

Further reassurance was based on recognising that cholera was not uniquely threatening, but actually in the same class as many other more familiar diseases. The Morning Chronicle told its readers that "all the facts preclude distressing apprehension...the risks are small if common sense is applied ...cholera is after all only one among many risks" [31]. The Morning Post, which gave the subject scant attention during 1848, except in the context of its unceasing criticism of the Board of Health, contributed to this tendency to reduce alarm by publishing a report that declared typhus and scarlatina were actually more dangerous than cholera [32]. The appearance of a similar article in Oxford's Jackson's Journal, which questioned the rationale of arousing "such terror at cholera" when consumption and typhus kill far more, suggests that such views were fairly widespread [33]. These references to endemic diseases are evidence of the influence of the public health movement and the spread of the ideas propagated by the Board of Health.

Not only was cholera now seen to be merely one disease among many, it was also regarded as preventable. This more practical and optimistic attitude seemed

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[30] The Times editorial 9 October 1848.

[31] Morning Chronicle 19 October 1848.

[32] Morning Post 9 November 1848.

[33] Jackson's Oxford Journal 21 October 1848.

widely held during these early months, and editors made frequent reference to the power of human control in relation to epidemic disease. In praising the national character for the manner in which it faced the return of cholera, the Morning Chronicle perceived "a temper to meet all calamities amenable to the jurisdiction of human science, skill and endeavour" - in which category it clearly placed the current visitation [34]. The Times asserted that cholera was plainly amenable to human control and that preparations were signally effectual; it recommended that

we should avail ourselves of the spirit originated by unwarranted panic to effect removal of other evil agencies - let us make ourselves cholera-proof and if cholera comes not, typhus and scarlet fever may be banished and every poor householder a gainer [35]

And in a later reiteration: "all or nearly all the facts yet known...show we are stronger than the disease if we will but avail ourselves of the means actually at our disposal" [36]. The mood of editorials at this time was thus characterised by confidence in man's ability to deal with the threat, which was rendered less formidable by ranking cholera with the other familiar diseases of dirt rather than ascribing to it a uniquely intractable quality.

In spite of these explicitly reassuring messages, however, the language now used to describe cholera suggests that a less optimistic view of the disease prevailed beneath the surface: such epithets as "malign pestilence", "inscrutable malady", "plague" and "scourge" were hardly consistent with complete confidence in rapid eradication of the epidemic [37].

The only newspaper to associate cholera with religion during the early months of the second outbreak was the Morning Chronicle. The editor suggested that cholera was but one more warning against filth, intemperance, reckless indulgence of appetite, and society's selfish neglect of the poor:

let the warning be reverently heeded and we may as a people have cause to thank Providence for an infliction which like so many other temporary and

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[34] Morning Chronicle editorial 19 October 1848.

[35] The Times editorial 16 October 1848.

[36] The Times editorial 1 November 1848.

[37] The Times 11 October 1848, 22 August 1849; Morning Post 17 September 1849; Morning Chronicle 15 August 1849.

partial evils, is but a "blessing in disguise"

and later:

it seems part of the beneficent designs of Providence that every great evil, calamity or visitation should be accompanied or followed by good [38]

Although cholera is seen here in terms of the providential system, it does not seem to be recognised as a special intervention, or specifically designed to punish the nation. As in several Morning Chronicle editorials, there is a plea for a more charitable and socially-responsible attitude towards "diseases of poverty", among which cholera is clearly classified.

As the epidemic approached the first anniversary of its arrival, a new note of anxiety began to disturb the reassuring tone, leading to some inconsistency in editorial pronouncements upon the subject. In contrast with its earlier praise for the way the public was facing the threat, the Morning Chronicle now sounded a warning note:

familiarity breeds contempt [we are] no longer frightened of cholera...yet the scourge has fallen upon us this year with more than double its former severity [We are] not trying to alarm the public..[We]..have waited till signs of improvement before speaking out...we make the statement rather with the object of awakening attention - not only to the ignorance that still exists as to cause of the pestilence and therefore as to means of arresting its progress - but more particularly to the little that has been done by regularly constituted authorities...to make the public better acquainted with its nature and treatment [39]

Later that month an editorial again condemned "the utter ignorance which prevails as to the cause, nature and treatment of the pestilence now raging" [40], thus abandoning the earlier confidence in the power of human science to defeat epidemics.

Editorial opinion in The Times shifted from arguing in August that over-reporting was causing unnecessary public apprehension, to admitting in September that cholera had now assumed a more destructive character; but it was still hoped that "under Providence we have in our hands the means of depriving this fearful pestilence of half its power", thus showing rather less than wholehearted

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[38] Morning Chronicle editorials 19 October, 3 November 1848.

[39] Morning Chronicle editorial 13 August 1849.

[40] Morning Chronicle editorial 24 August 1849.

confidence! [41].

By mid-September however the changed mood became explicit. The Morning Post now raised no expectations of a human solution: cholera was acknowledged to be a divinely inflicted punishment, requiring a penitential response. Cholera was now held to be

the mortal sickness with which it has pleased Divine Providence to afflict the land...the precise causes, as well as the remedies, with which the all-bountiful Creator may have furnished the store house of nature against it, remain yet unknown. What is certain is that the hand of God is extended in judgement upon us, and that we are left to seek our relief from the mercy of Him whose direct power and benevolent purposes we are but too slow to acknowledge and appreciate...the nation should reverently and in humble penitence bow itself before the throne of him who created all men...acknowledge the justice of his great rebuke, in meek submission to his just decree [42].

A similar message was conveyed in the editorial of the Cambridge Chronicle, though here the need to resort to supernatural aid is more directly related to the failure of purely human efforts. It was asserted that:

Science and experience are at fault with regard to the cholera. Its desolating progress ought, according to the light of human knowledge, to have been arrested ere this...there has been no lack of human efforts to stay the pestilence. Meanwhile, our rulers, deferring to the infidel "spirit of the age", decline to authorize a national appeal to the clemency of the Almighty. The Christian people demand that those in authority should set apart a day for the **nation** to humble itself before God and beseech him to turn away His wrath from us [43].

The failure of government to accede to this demand continued to be the editor's main theme a week later. While noting the good attendance at local days of prayer and humiliation, he commented on the recent abatement of the pestilence: "may we not ascribe this to the prayers of those who have already turned to the Lord in faith ?" implying editorial endorsement for the efficacy of prayer [44].

The Morning Post also commented upon "the gratifying pious response" to special church services, and suggested that

out of apparent evil it often pleases Providence to evoke good, and it may be

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[41] The Times editorials 13 August, 12 September 1849.

[42] Morning Post editorial 17 September 1849.

[43] Cambridge Chronicle editorial 15 September 1849.

[44] Cambridge Chronicle editorial 22 September 1849.

that from this visitation of the cholera will arise a more general religious sentiment than has hitherto existed [45]

This hope seems to have been fulfilled in some measure if editorial opinion of The Times was at all representative. The down-turn in mortality figures seems to have prompted a more religious interpretation of cholera than had been evident during the early months or when the epidemic was at its height. In late September The Times admitted that man's efforts had had little effect upon the course of the epidemic. The decline in mortality was now entirely credited to supernatural action:

[It is] impossible to exaggerate the sentiment of gratitude at the abatement of the pestilence...recognising in the mercy that has arrested the hand of the Destroying Angel the salvation of this country from moral and material ills which have ever followed in the train of great pestilence.. therefore should not there be public recognition of the Might which has stood between the living and the dead - of the Mercy which has spared us from the consummation of a dreadful chastisement? [46]

This editorial continued with a lengthy justification of its explicitly religious view of cholera:

We know that there are men who refuse to acknowledge the hand of God in any great dispensation of His providence -to whom all the vicissitudes of the material world are but the casual results of fortuitous combinations or inevitable operations of undetected laws. Fortunately the majority of mankind have not concurred in ousting the Deity from all concern in the world which He has made. Most men still feel sensible that there is an Omniscient and all-powerful being who directs and determines the issues of life and death to men and nations. It is useless to talk of secondary causes [which] are but the instruments which the Deity chooses to employ. Sickness, famine, death are warnings by which He reminds mankind of their weakness, helplessness and mortality. These are but secondary or tertiary causes which can be traced step by step through devious but connected sequences but each man in his own heart feels them to be indications of a supreme will... Doubtless cholera like other phenomena follows certain definite and ascertainable laws. But the laws of which we speak are but a convenient phrase to express the will of the great Lawgiver. He who made can abate, modify, suspend or warp them. He who can bid a plague arise in the East may direct its sinuous course so as to baffle the most intelligent. One fact is prominent - we are in the hands of a higher Power. Visitations remind men they are accountable. Therefore there should be **national** thanksgiving, because [there has been] national suffering and

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[45] Morning Post editorial 20 September 1849.

[46] The Times editorial 27 September 1849.

deliverance [and] thanks to Him who heard their prayers [47].

This editorial has been quoted at length because it is an explicit affirmation of a providentialism which incorporates the notion of an interventionist deity. Cholera is ultimately, via supernatural manipulation of natural laws, an expression of divine will. Since it was in answer to prayer rather than a result of human sanitary activity that the epidemic has declined, national acts of thanksgiving are deemed appropriate.

A similar view was taken two days later by the Morning Post. In a long editorial, the main theme of which was criticism of the continuing controversy over the correct form of national gestures, the editor rejoiced that:

on one point, happily, there is no difference of opinion. All have admitted the righteousness of Heaven's great rebuke and consequent fitness of some universal act in which national penitence may approach the footstool of mercy [48]

He also observed that from the day the prayer was adopted the epidemic gradually and steadily abated, an eloquent answer, he claimed, to those who held that the "infidelity of government", in refusing a General Humiliation, was the main cause of cholera. As in The Times, supernatural control and purpose in epidemics was apparently accepted as uncontroversial, as was the plausibility of divine response to human prayer.

It appears however that in spite of the similarity of theological position on this issue, the editors of the Morning Post and The Times were addressing different audiences. The latter was concerned to justify its position primarily against "men who refuse to acknowledge the hand of God", while the Morning Post reserved most criticism for those indulging in (religious) "party strife", who were accused of displaying a "violent and unchristian spirit". This was clearly an attack on evangelicals whose demands for national fasting in acknowledgement of "national guilt" and "infidelity of government" were seen by the Morning Post as socially divisive and less effective than private prayer and charity. As was seen in the religious periodicals survey, the evangelical organ the Record campaigned

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[47] The Times editorial 27 September 1849.

[48] Morning Post editorial 29 September 1849.

stridently on this issue and was quick to condemn any public opposition to its viewpoint.

A long and vehement editorial appeared in The Times a few days later in which its recent views were modified to re-establish the place of human effort, though still within an explicitly providential framework. Under attack now were not rationalists, but "less enlightened" clergymen. In urging more preventive measures the editor asked:

if on the other hand, while we recognise the hand of God in the late awful pestilence, instead of using means which science places at our disposal...we rely exclusively on prayer and humiliation to obtain from Him that which He has mercifully enabled us to do for ourselves...if we listen to those less enlightened members of the clergy who falsely separate faith from works, and setting the light of revelation in fallacious opposition with the light of reason, seek to persuade the ignorant and superstitious that intramural burial [is] nothing to do with cholera, which is merely to be regarded as providential judgement for our sins, independent of physical causes and irreducible to human control; if we shut our ears...to overwhelming evidence adduced by sanitary reformers...if we let cessation of immediate peril betray us into former apathy and indolence, then we must expect natural retribution of our criminal folly [49].

In ensuring that his promotion of sanitarian efforts was presented within an explicitly religious view of epidemic disease, the writer of this editorial seemed aware of the need to defend himself from charges of impiety. But nonetheless, there is a clear shift away from a perception of cholera as a directly imposed chastisement towards punishment through natural laws.

This later interpretation had more resonance with the view expressed by the editor of the Morning Chronicle. Like The Times, this paper had also become more religious as mortality began to decline, though its editorials had never abandoned an interest in the physical causes of cholera. The *primary* cause, it was claimed, is the filth and squalor of the poor, want of food, pure air and water, but it was admitted that many look for the *final* cause, rather than proximate or remote causes - namely chastisement for sins. Without expressing a personal opinion on this point, the editor conceded that whatever may have been the national offences, society had transgressed regarding its neglect of the poor, and under the

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[49] The Times editorial 2 October 1849.



providential scheme here outlined, nature itself punished man for such transgression:

The Designer of the Universe has ordained that not only our own health but the health of those about us should depend on the cleanliness of our bodies and homes - the first condition of our lives is purity of air and water... emanations from our bodies have been made offensive as if to induce us to remove them - and forced to do so because they act as poisons. So wonderfully and Beneficently too has this law been arranged that those who continue to live amongst the pollution of their bodies are the first to fall victims to the poisoned effluvium and disease thus engendered. May it not have been wisely ordained that want and filth should be made a source of pestilence and death lest we...should forget the miseries of less fortunate brethren? [50]

Thus cholera remained part of the divine plan, though following natural laws to achieve a purpose which is less to punish than to teach greater social responsibility. There was no editorial comment on the subject so frequently debated in the other papers, the question of a national gesture of humiliation and prayer.

There was another burst of newspaper comment on cholera on the occasion of the General Thanksgiving in November 1849. The Morning Post repeated the message of its earlier editorials on the epidemic, welcoming national acknowledgement of the mercy of God in having stayed the pestilence when human resources had failed:

it is meet and right that it should be so. In its advent and departure the terrible plague has equally defied the investigations of human science. Physical causes doubtless exist for both, but these causes are under the control and direction of an inscrutable will and an invisible hand... resources of learning have been exhausted in vain [51]

The editor continued by pointing out the connection between the nation's prayers and the lifting of the epidemic. Deaths had peaked, he claimed, and scientific skill stood at fault, until the churches united in solemn prayer - when mortality began to decline. "Is this not an emphatic rebuke to the presumption of philosophy and an irresistible ground of thanksgiving and praise?" he asked, and concluded, again registering a belief in the efficacy of prayer that "it has pleased God to listen to

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[50] Morning Chronicle editorial 9 October 1849.

[51] Morning Post editorial 15 November 1849.

our prayer" [52].

In The Times however there is some evidence of development in religious perceptions of cholera during this post-epidemic period. The editorial view in November seems something of a retreat from the previous position regarding the balance between human and supernatural responsibility: it was now declared that relief from cholera owed nothing to skilful treatment or preventive measures, rather more to:

that unseen Power which first despatched the messenger of death on its distant long-appointed mission. HE alone gave it bounds it should not exceed and a day when it should return. So far it is vain to talk of natural laws for it is a mere gratuitous assumption to suppose these laws omnipotent over all creation, visible and invisible, known and unknown, intelligible and utterly mysterious. So, if we allow a notion of a Deity and an overruling Providence once to enter our thoughts we are bound to admit that in the history of the recent pestilence we ought to recognise an actual deliverance and accordingly as on this day to present our humble and thankful acknowledgements [53]

Although this seems a confident exposition of the primary role of providence in the epidemic, the editor responded in advance to potential critics:

the acknowledgement of a divine visitation is falsely and absurdly conceived by many persons to be inconsistent with proper regard to the ordinary course of nature and therefore to the capability and duties of man.

This "fallacy", which The Times labels the "Rationalist" position, was unacceptable because "it repudiates the idea of praeter-natural interference and claims for the human will alone the power of controlling one law of nature by the operation of another". The "Pietist" view was also rejected because, the editor claimed, it held sanitary measures to be "atheistical rebellion against the behests of an Omnipotent will". Having demolished these opposing extremes, the editor attempted to establish a convincing *via media*, claiming:

The historical and geographical course of the cholera, while it manifests the finger of the Almighty, bears signal testimony to the revenge invariably exacted by nature from all that neglect her ordinary laws.

The argument is thus extended to reaffirm man's responsibility for observing natural laws, without detracting from the claim for the absolute power of

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[52] Morning Post editorial 15 November 1849.

[53] The Times editorial 15 November 1849.

"overruling providence" with which this editorial opened [54].

The influence of Bishop Blomfield can perhaps be traced in editorials at this time. His espousal of the sanitarian cause was much publicised by The Times, and his pronouncements upon this subject had the effect of giving spiritual sanction to a broadening of the scope for human intervention in epidemic disease. This incorporation of practical sanitarianism within orthodox Christianity was the position favoured by the editor and he welcomed authoritative support: "he [the Bishop] has responded to a heavenly call and exactly met the demands of the occasion" [55]. It was in keeping with the editor's demand that society should accord "a sacred rank for details of sanitary science - let them be urged from pulpit as well as reading desk", again clearly establishing his opposition to "pietist" critics of this practical approach to epidemic disease. Reporting on sermons given at this time The Times also commented "Bishop Blomfield and the Dean of Westminster went deep into natural causes but neither precluded the idea of a Divine interference". By this means the editor drew public attention to his recognition of the continuing role of an intervening providence, and also secured clerical authority for his somewhat inconsistent position regarding the roles of providence, natural law and man in the generation and prevention of cholera.

The Dean of Westminster was not universally accepted as an infallible authority in this area however. The Morning Post returned to the subject a few days later as if to redress the balance disturbed by The Times's overconcentration on physical aspects of cholera. The editor made a sweeping criticism of contemporary public debate, including the religious sector, for its "trivial" tone, and instanced the recent sermon of William Buckland [56]. Although "the Hand of God" in the recent epidemic had been acknowledged, the Dean had added "but also we must not overlook what he is punishing us for...the state of our water". The Post's editor regarded this as an "abuse of the occasion and desecration of a sacred place", and took exception to other parts of the sermon in which Buckland had maintained that there is no denial of Providence in the

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[54] All the above quotations from The Times 15 November 1849.

[55] The Times editorial 6 November 1849.

[56] Morning Post editorial 19 November 1849.

proverb "God helps those who help themselves"; the age of miracles being long passed, God acts by secondary means. We must not expect miracles - "only wash and be clean" being the recommendation. This "unsatisfactory" interpretation of the cholera epidemic was contrasted with the sermon of a Reverend W J Irons of Brompton [57]. While admitting natural causes for cholera, this clergyman had led his congregation to look beyond to "that power which commands and directs natural causes" and had acknowledged divine judgement in the epidemic. It was the priest's duty, maintained the Morning Post, to tell the nation and the individual that cholera is "the hand of God", that national conduct has deserved Divine punishment. The editor proceeded to criticise those who sought to take advantage of the pestilence in order to promote physical reforms, rather than moral! Drains should be left to engineers not pulpits.

This editorial strikes a different note from that of September, and points to a religious view which eschews ritual fasting for national sin on the one hand, and over-emphasis of practical prevention on the other. This attempt to reclaim the pulpit for strictly spiritual and moral matters might have been motivated by a fear that the essence of religion was threatened by the intrusion of practical and political issues into the religious domain, or might merely have reflected opposition to the social and economic views associated with sanitarianism. Kingsley's sermons and lectures on the second epidemic may well have offended the propertied classes, though no evidence emerged to suggest that they were widely known at this point.

If this attempt to reinforce the spiritual aspect of cholera was indeed a response to encroaching secularization, the Morning Post was taking a different route from The Times. Editorials in the latter publication showed a concern "to sanctify" the sanitary approach while holding on to the idea of an "overruling providence" in epidemic disease. The Morning Chronicle did not offer any religious comment on the occasion of national thanksgiving, a fairly pointed omission. Instead this paper began to publish its celebrated Mayhew articles, which

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[57] In The Times' "List of London Clergy", The Rev W J Irons was described as a "strong Tractarian".

drew the nation's attention to precisely those "physical evils" so deplored by Blomfield and The Times, but, in the pages of the Chronicle, divested of an explicitly religious context. Thus we see a divergence of the three editorial positions at the end of the second epidemic.

As during the first epidemic, there was wide variation between different newspapers in the amount of correspondence published. The local papers and the Morning Post carried too few letters for useful analysis, but The Times, as during the first epidemic, published a large number on the subject when cholera returned in 1848, and on this occasion many had a religious content. This strong interest in religious aspects of the epidemic raises the question of whether the correspondence reflects the concerns of the wider public more accurately than the largely secular editorials during the first months of the epidemic. Or was the editor more in tune with the wider public mood in refraining from religious comment until cholera was on the wane? The timing of the expression of religious views could show that editorial opinion had been influenced by letters of correspondents during the early months. The extent to which personal editorial views affected the choice of letters for publication must also be considered, though in the case of The Times there is reason to think this would not have been a significant feature. The editor at this time, J T Delane, made it his business to discover the "public mood", and made use of "a shrewd idle clergyman to loiter and listen" in public places around the country to assess the strength and variety of opinion on topical issues [58]. But as Cook points out, the appearance of such opinions in print, especially on the pages of The Times, immediately ensured that they gained wider currency.

Questions of the direction of influence are difficult to answer even in relation to the well-documented The Times partly because there was rarely any editorial reaction to or comment upon individual letters, except in the contagion debate of 1831/2 described earlier. The lack of editorial comment was at times surprising, as for example, with the publication of a "sanitary remonstrance" during the second epidemic. This was an unusual letter from a group of barely-literate complainants on an aspect of public health in which the editor had previously shown strong

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[58] Cook, Delane of The Times, p.295.

interest. However, it was published without accompanying comment, and apparently stimulated no further correspondence [59].

There was also no immediate editorial contribution to the issue which dominated much of the correspondence during August and early September, namely the demand for a national act of prayer or humiliation. While this, and related, religious questions dominated the cholera correspondence, the editorials focused upon secular aspects such as sanitation, nuisance removal, intramural burial and the Board of Health [60]. No reference was made to the religious concerns of these correspondents, and no answer to their repeated questions was forthcoming until the epidemic began to decline. These letters tended to pose rhetorical questions such as:

Are we not visited with the present direful disease which baffles all medical skills and which nothing but an Almighty hand can remove? Why have the heads of our National Church been so long backward in getting a general Fast and day of humiliation appointed by which the prayer of the whole nation may be offered up to Almighty God to withdraw his present severe chastisement from us? Until the Nation humbles itself before the throne of Grace it cannot be expected that the calamity with which we are now visited, no doubt most justly, will be removed...Has the spirit of infidelity so greatly prevalent in the nations around us affected our land? A plague is upon us which is hurrying to eternity thousands of our fellow creatures and yet no general fast and humiliation is appointed to deprecate the wrath of God, to sue for forgiveness of national sins and entreat His mercy. Unless we humble ourselves we cannot expect that God will be gracious to us...no day of humiliation to be set apart...most deplorable decision...rulers of the church entreated not to disappoint the expectation of her members. Must the church partake of the sin of government? [Cholera] falls most heavily on those least able to bear it - an additional reason for general and solemn acknowledgement of the chastising hand of Almighty God [61].

Various local Fast days were held up as examples to shame the authorities for their negligence and the national Fast of 1832 was frequently cited as sufficient

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[59] This letter of 5 July 1849 from the inhabitants of Carrier Street presented a graphic description of the state of housing for the poor in London. It appeared to stimulate no further correspondence or comment until an official report was reprinted on 9 July 1849, but again without editorial comment.

[60] The Times, 1, 4, 5, 13, September 1849.

[61] This is a composite of extracts from letters in The Times of August and September 1849.

reason for holding one during the present affliction [62]. Several other religious aspects were raised in correspondence which were not touched on in editorials at this time. Interestingly, these included an argument, on religious grounds, against a general Fast - it was claimed that solemn fasts were often mockeries, that it would be better to have special prayers for use by the truly religious and devout. Living as he did in "a densely populated district" the author wished to avoid "the listless indifference or riot and debauchery" which had characterised previous days of Fast. He concluded, therefore, "let us not tempt God to inflict more punishment and increase this judgement against us" but rather "let public action be confined to special prayers to be used in church and chapel on stated days" [63]. Others, drawing on the idea of providence in the epidemic, urged greater use of charity because "such alms may be the human means which He may deign to make use of to stay this grievous sickness" [64] or dismissed theoretical speculation on causal mechanisms in favour of acknowledging the ultimate cause:

Talk as we may of secondary causes, let anyone read the historical account of cholera and then let him doubt if he can that there is an over-ruling Providence, that permits and guides the progress of this disease [65]

Thus until the autumn of 1849, The Times correspondents appear to have perceived the epidemic in a more religious light than its editor both in terms of how and why it arose, and how best to overcome it.

As was shown earlier, it was not until the epidemic began to decline in late September that editorials made reference to the subject of so much earlier correspondence, the need for a national religious gesture. The National Thanksgiving then featured positively in all editorials alongside endorsements of a providential interpretation of the epidemic. This editorial change to a more religious outlook may be an example of The Times "weathercock effect"; if so, it could have been either a delayed response to its own correspondents or a reflection

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[62] The Times letters 13, 15, 17, September 1849.

[63] The Times letter from "Clericus" 3 September 1849.

[64] The Times letter 12 September 1849.

[65] The Times letter 15 September 1849.

of a changed mood in the wider public [66]. Or was the "weathercock" in reality more responsive to government action - the authorising of a National Thanksgiving - than it was to "public mood"? The latter is not borne out by contemporary observers of The Times's conduct on other issues and so seems a less plausible explanation. Alternatively, the editorial response might be less a reflection of public mood than a statement of a specific theological position. A view of providence which could recognise supernatural action in ending the epidemic, but not the act of divine judgement or chastisement implied in national humiliation, might well result in editorial reticence on religious interpretations of cholera until the declining mortality allowed an uncontroversial endorsement of thanksgiving. However, later editorials provide no evidence of a persistent distinction between chastisement and mercy in perceptions of the role of "overruling providence".

What does emerge quite clearly is a difference between editorial and correspondents' opinion regarding the role and responsibility of man in the epidemic. Although the prominence given to man's role fluctuates over the months, it remains a central aspect of editorial opinion throughout, in contrast with the correspondence, where there was but a single reference to the idea that man was divinely empowered to take preventive measures. This was in a letter about burials, in which a correspondent from Lambeth asked [67]:

How can we expect Almighty God to work a miracle in arresting this plague in answer to prayer if we do not fully do our duty in removing known causes of disease?

This sole letter in The Times offers a marked contrast with the attitude of most of the Morning Chronicle correspondents, who not only assumed human

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[66] Ivan Asquith, "The structure, ownership and control of the press 1780-1855" in G Boyce, J Curran, P Wingate eds. Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day (1978) p.108. There were contrasting contemporary views of the conduct of The Times in this respect. Acknowledging that it attempted "to reflect the changing moods of public opinion" it was accused of being "impudently inconsistent in everything except malice and mischief" (Quarterly Review LXIV), while Lord Grey concluded it was "an excellent barometer of the state of public opinion" (quoted in Aspinall, Politics and the Press, p.380)

[67] The Times letter 14 September 1849.



responsibility and capability in dealing with the epidemic, but contributed specific advice on what should be done. The number of letters on cholera during the second epidemic increased significantly from 1831/2 levels, suggesting that Chronicle readers had become much more interested in this subject in 1849. A high proportion of their correspondents were doctors and, by the time of the second epidemic, there was a larger and more scientific medical profession to respond to the challenge. The majority of their letters were upon strictly scientific or political aspects of cholera, contributions to the ongoing debates on causal mechanisms and alternative treatments. But two of these incorporated an explicitly religious view of the epidemic. "Cholera psychologically considered" was the title of a letter from a Hammersmith doctor in which there was a plea for more awareness of the effect of mind on body: "without depreciating the importance of physical causes [of cholera]" he claimed that there was need to consider psychological and moral causes and thus to seek "powerful moral remedies". He stated:

as a member of a Christian community, I would not for a moment have it supposed that I differ from those who see in the present fearful scourge the finger of an angry God chastising his children for their many transgressions against his Divine laws. Neither would I say anything to discountenance the setting apart a day of national prayer and humiliation...The psychological view tends to establish the importance and necessity of prostrating ourselves in prayer...God has so intimately associated the spiritual with the material portion of our organisation [68]

This is a surprisingly modern-sounding approach to physical illness though in fact the psychological explanation is firmly rooted within a wholly religious worldview. The other letter was one of several written by a Dr Richard King to the Chairman of the Board of Health, requesting that his reports on the health of Lambeth receive the immediate attention of the Board; this was presumably published as an open letter to maximise the pressure for action upon the Chairman, the Earl of Carlisle. Dr King explained that

in the destructive agent, which in all humility I believe I have discovered at its own home - the chemical nature of which God, in His infinite wisdom may long withhold from us - I see the hand of Providence strongly marked;

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[68] Morning Chronicle letter from Dr Forbes Winslow 9 September 1849.

but as human effect is granted to us and even urged upon us in the Book which we all acknowledge to be of Divine origin, I pray your Lordship's attention to my reports [69]

The presentation of his argument within a religious framework may have been intended to enhance the force of his plea, but it appears also to reflect his personal approach to medical research into the causal mechanisms of cholera.

It is also noteworthy that doctors chose to publish letters so essentially religious in the Morning Chronicle. While of the three newspapers studied, this is the one most concerned to promote scientific understanding of cholera, the generally more secular tone might have made such a correspondent less confident of publication in this paper. There was however no editorial comment on either of these letters by which to assess their impact. A couple of letters, apparently not from doctors, demanding a national fast also appeared during September; again, they attracted no editorial attention, and were far outnumbered by those of entirely scientific and medical content.

In both The Times and the more secular Morning Chronicle, serving different populations of readers, it appears that correspondents were inclined to take a more religious view of cholera than the editors during the second epidemic. Religious letters in both cases preceded the changed tone in editorials which appeared later in the year, but there is little indication that either editor was responding to, or influenced by, the views of his correspondents. While The Times carried a far higher ratio of religious to secular correspondence, both papers allocated considerable space to the former. So while there was no editorial support for providential interpretations for some months, it appears that the editors did not wish to exclude such views from their pages. This was possibly to maintain an acceptedly pious image in the prevailing climate of opinion and had the further advantage of enabling the editor in each case to pursue more secular aspects of cholera - those in which he was more interested.

#### The 1853/4 Cholera Outbreak

The much reduced number of both editorials and correspondence on the subject in

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[69] Morning Chronicle letter 6 October 1849.

1853 suggest a significant diminishing of the interest cholera held for the main newspapers and their readers after 1849. Although it still attracted such adjectives as "mysterious" and "inscrutable", this no longer seemed to trigger a religious response. The "failure of science" in relation to cholera, though still remarked upon, was no longer regarded as justification for a resort to providential explanations. Cholera was now less alarming partly because it had come to be seen as almost endemic, and so appeared less like a "visitation". The new view was also the result of the widely-held belief that the disease could be controlled, even if precise causes remained obscure, by manipulation of the known "predisposing conditions". This distinction between actual causes and predisposing conditions was frequently drawn, and formed the basis for a more optimistic outlook, even though the lack of public preparedness which had invited back the unwelcome visitation was widely deplored.

The most dramatic development in cholera reporting was seen in the Morning Post. A significant decline in the number and size of editorials on cholera compared with 1849 was matched by marked changes in content. The epidemic was now hardly mentioned in a religious context, and there was no reference to its role as an agent of divine judgement. Cholera was in fact explicitly removed from the category of providential phenomena. This occurred in an editorial in October 1853, commenting on the Registrar General's report; it was claimed that

cholera gives warning of its approach, nor is it in its early stages beyond reach of medical skill. Therefore it is unpardonable that it is gaining a hold. Certain calamities are beyond human control [and] clearly referable to the designs of inscrutable Providence. But cholera has its laws...[70]

The editor proceeded to urge "people of rank and influence" to take the lead in removing nuisances. There seemed to exist no doubt now about cholera's place within the strictly human domain, requiring a practical response by individuals and society. An earlier editorial had used the distinction between "inscrutable" cause and predisposing conditions to make the following encouraging statement:

in considering this alarming circumstance it is consolatory to know that however inscrutable the actual nature of the disorder is and however difficult to be reduced when it once takes hold, its predisposing causes are almost

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[70] Morning Post editorial 6 October 1853.

wholly under our control [71]

Later, pursuing the moral dimension with which he had concluded his comments on the second epidemic, the editor conceded that cholera was leading to public health improvements, but pointed out that there were also other considerations - the condition of the poor has "moral" as well as physical aspects. Because of the "two-fold power of evil, moral and physical" it was necessary that church and state should work together. There was editorial criticism of the church for its failure to reach the poor [72]. This vision of cooperation between clergy and public health officials, jointly sharing responsibility for the moral and physical welfare of the poor shows considerable development from the earlier criticism of those who preached sanitarianism from the pulpit, or overemphasised physical, at the expense of moral, reform.

A new attitude was also revealed in the Morning Post's comment on Palmerston's letter to the Edinburgh Presbytery in which he had refused their request for a national fast [73]. The editor praised the "commonsense of humbling ourselves by obeying his laws", rather than by praying or fasting; piety is shown in action, not in form alone [74]. This is in marked contrast with the views on national religious gestures in Morning Post editorials during 1849. During the summer and autumn of 1854, while the epidemic continued to raise mortality rates, Morning Post editorials were more concerned with the war in the Crimea than cholera. Providence was frequently invoked in relation to national fortunes in war and also in relation to the harvest, but on the few occasions when editorials referred to the epidemic, it was apparent that this subject had indeed passed from the realm of "inscrutable Providence" into sanitary science [75].

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[71] Morning Post editorial 15 September 1853.

[72] Morning Post editorial 28 September 1853.

[73] Lord Palmerston, as Home Secretary, refused the Edinburgh Presbytery's request for a national fast in October 1853 on the grounds that Providence had given man the power to prevent or disperse the "exhalations" which cause cholera. (Full text in Appendix A)

[74] Morning Post editorial 31 October 1853.

[75] Morning Post editorials 30 August, 20 October 1854; Providence in the harvest, 25 September 1854.

The Times also carried markedly fewer and shorter editorials on cholera during the third epidemic, and its brief comments reveal some considerable changes in attitude. Clearly, although the same editor, JT Delane, remained in post, cholera was now perceived in a different light. The most significant change was a shift in the balance between human and supernatural responsibility for epidemics. The editor now resolved some of the contradictions inherent in his 1849 pronouncements upon cholera by reducing the emphasis on "overruling providence" as the primary cause. "The criminal neglect of man" was now the sole reason given for the reappearance of cholera, and the remedy - "public safety is in our own hands" - no longer required supernatural aid [76]. A few days later this message was reiterated: "The immediate causes [are] all known, and are not only removable but of man's own making and wholly dependent on his will and pleasure" [77]. Such confident statements left no place for providential action, and indeed a reliance on supernatural aid was explicitly condemned:

it will not do to sit still and talk complacently of cholera as a dispensation of Providence. If society, by a neglect of duties which may be fairly proved to belong to it, increases the effect of an epidemic - then we may feel sure that moral laws will not be violated in vain, and that retribution will be exacted in one form or another [78].

As in the Morning Post, it was the distinction now perceived between the precise "scientific cause" and "predisposing conditions" which allowed this more confident attitude to predominate during the third epidemic:

be the nature of the disorder ever so mysterious, it is subject to certain known conditions...science is compelled to bow its head when at one time there are no cases, and at another, fifteen thousand...superstition or rather that maudlin sort of religion which consists chiefly in doing nothing, finds itself reproved by a visitation which comes where we prepare a home for it, and may be averted by those who take proper precautions [79]

This is another example of editorial hostility towards "superstitious" religion, which had coloured The Times response to cholera four years earlier [80].

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[76] The Times editorial 17 September 1853.

[77] The Times editorial 22 September 1853.

[78] The Times editorial 5 November 1853.

[79] The Times editorial 15 September 1853.

[80] For example, The Times editorial 2 October 1849.

During the third epidemic, however, there was less emphasis on contrasting superstition with active Christianity - which combines faith with sanitarian good works - than on purely practical sanitary reform. By 1854, cholera appeared to have become so mundane a phenomenon that the need for more than sanitary measures seems not to have arisen:

nothing can be more strangely regular than the laws according to which this dreadful disease appears to regulate its operation...difficult to name among all forms of pestilence upon record one so manageable [81]

In comparison with the more secular tones of editorials at this time, the correspondence during 1853 appears to retain a more religious view of the epidemic. This is especially noticeable in several of the letters from doctors. One of these from a hospital physician confessed that he had:

long since ceased to have any doubt as to the moral of this "visitation". During the first epidemic cholera seemed to be the besom of the Almighty to sweep away the accumulated moral refuse and filth of the country but the epidemic of 1832 failed to teach us that we are our brothers' keepers. The second epidemic [attacked] much more respectable victims...if this view of the mission of cholera be correct, it has a heavy reckoning yet to settle with a nation that is as largely blessed with the means of promoting the moral and physical well-being of its lower orders as it is slow to use them [82]

Another medical correspondent endorsed the moral message of cholera from an explicitly Christian viewpoint, "as Christians we are bound to employ our wealth and our intelligence to rescue those of our brethren not so blessed from the pestilence" [83]. A third repeated the request so frequently made during the previous epidemic for national prayer. This "earnest wish" he believed to be generally entertained - sometimes a nation moves in advance of rulers. History demonstrates the inflictions and favours of God, and since prayers worked in 1849, he recommended a similar course now [84]. During the late summer and autumn of 1854 cholera again became a subject of correspondence but letters became increasingly secular in content.

The Morning Chronicle continued to have the most secular view of cholera

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[81] The Times editorial 13 September 1854.

[82] The Times letter 19 September 1853.

[83] The Times letter from Sheffield doctor 17 September 1853.

[84] The Times letter from "MD Oxon" 21 October 1853.

and during the third epidemic all references in both editorials and letters were without religious connotation. The subject tended to be treated with a strong emphasis on social responsibility for prevention. The mood was confident but realistic:

though we cannot banish the mysterious malady which has reappeared amongst us, we need not provide a head quarters for its reception...whatever may be the specific cause, it has long been ascertained that improper food, intemperance, excesses of all kinds and above all filth and vitiated atmosphere are the chief predisposing agents; and these are in our power to control, mostly as individuals but some can only be removed by public action [85]

It was even claimed that "formidable as this malady is in its developed stage, there is no disease against which it is in our power to take such effectual precautions" [86]. Again we see scientific understanding of cause was made distinct from preventability:

the specific cause...unquestionably a mystery, but experience proves more and more clearly every week that certain conditions are almost invariably concomitant with its presence - if predisposing causes are removed, the essential one will not long preserve its sting. It depends on the will of the people...to disarm it in great measure if not wholly [87].

although science has not detected the precise specific cause of cholera, experience has abundantly demonstrated that its attacks may be warded off and its virulence mitigated by precautionary measures...the cholera in short is the appointed scourge of filth and corruption. If men will not learn...to be clean in their persons and dwellings, they will be taught by a more fearful monitor...poetical justice [88].

Here "poetical" or natural justice teaches the lessons of cleanliness, rather than the beneficent laws of providence invoked during the second epidemic. The Morning Chronicle's greater awareness of the problems of poverty since publishing Mayhew's reports, makes providential action in epidemics a less plausible model than previously. Certainly responsibility for society's failure to learn from earlier episodes is now laid upon government, landlords and guardians of the poor as well as individuals: "private interest must yield to public good" was an oft-repeated

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[85] Morning Chronicle editorial 19 September 1853.

[86] Morning Chronicle editorial 21 September 1853.

[87] Morning Chronicle editorial 13 October 1853.

[88] Morning Chronicle editorial 22 September 1853.

theme [89]. As in The Times, Palmerston's letter received no editorial comment. The Morning Chronicle published very few letters on cholera during the third epidemic, and none addressing religious aspects of the subject.

Local papers also carried very little on cholera at its third appearance. The editor of Jackson's Oxford Journal briefly warned that "the dread lesson, before regarded so little, should never be forgotten - that men can no longer drink polluted water, breathe impure air and neglect sanitary measures year after year with impunity" [90]. The sole Oxford correspondent on the subject also focused on the connection between cholera and bad water, adding his belief that "the Creator has beneficently bestowed offensive effluvia on all decaying matter to compel cleanliness" [91]. The editor of the Cambridge Chronicle on the other hand reacted very strongly to the Home Secretary's refusal of a national humiliation:

The disease is a mysterious one. It has baffled medical science to discover its immediate cause...It behoves us all...to be prepared to resist the evil...to diminish the predisposing causes. But, while not neglecting secondary causes, let us give heed to the first cause. At Soham, we are rejoiced to find, the inhabitants gave a practical contradiction to that unhappy dictum of the Home Secretary, which goes in effect to deny the efficacy of prayer. They wisely set apart a day for supplication of Divine aid. This is a course which the **nation** ought to pursue: but if our rulers refuse us the opportunity of doing this, and tell us to trust more in whitewash than in the Almighty, they cannot prevent individuals or households or congregations from humiliating themselves before God and praying to Him to withdraw the scourge which is hanging over a sinful nation. Lord Palmerston does not think "that a national fast would be suitable to the circumstances of the present moment" as regards the cholera. That is, Her Majesty's Home Secretary thinks whitewashing better than prayer and in effect tells the public that if what are called sanitary measures will not stay the progress of the pestilence, all direct appeals to the Almighty are in vain. These are the doctrines which in this intellectual nineteenth century find favour in a cabinet containing such great professors of religion as Lord Aberdeen and Mr Gladstone, and supported by a majority of the Bench of Bishops. It would seem indeed as if the measure of our iniquity was full, as if the day of vengeance was at hand, when a Minister of State can venture thus to throw open contempt at once upon the Word of God, which bids us recognise "the pestilence" as one of his "sore judgements" and

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[89] Morning Chronicle editorial 3 October 1853.

[90] Jackson's Oxford Journal editorial 23 September 1853.

[91] Jackson's Oxford Journal letter from G A Rowell 2 September 1854.



upon the devout feelings of the people, who desire to deprecate that judgement by an act of national humiliation and prayer [92].

This defence of a Bible-based interpretation of the epidemic, with its explicit espousal of the efficacy of prayer, has more in common with the world-view of religious periodicals at the time of the first epidemic than with newspaper editorials during the third, and in the light of developments in the national press, seems something of an anachronism in 1853. However, the influential evangelical paper The Record also adopted this attitude towards Palmerston's letter; it seems that an exclusively religious conception of epidemic disease persisted in some quarters, only making itself public when challenged by official "infidelity" [93].

### Conclusions

This newspaper survey has revealed some remarkable developments in perceptions of cholera during the midcentury years. Though the response to each of the outbreaks was multi-faceted and varied between the publications, it is possible nonetheless to detect some consistency in the pattern of change, not least in the way in which cholera was interpreted in religious terms. There was not however a simple uni-directional trend towards a more secular outlook over the course of the three outbreaks; religious perceptions peaked in the second epidemic, seventeen years after the first appearance of cholera. The second was also the episode which attracted most comment on all aspects of cholera - medical, social, and political, as well as religious. The general pattern, which pertained throughout the sample, showed a rapid development during the course of the second epidemic from the low-key, matter-of-fact attitudes which had characterised responses in 1831/2, to a more alarmist tone and explicitly providential interpretations in 1849. This pattern could be detected both in editorials and correspondence, though in the case of The Times, the changed mood in correspondence preceded that of editorials. The monthly mortality figures during 1849 give grounds for the extreme alarm evident during the late summer, though the public could not have been aware of the

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[92] Cambridge Chronicle editorial 5 November 1853.

[93] See Religious Periodicals, Chapter 4.

cumulative September total at the time, and must have been reacting to daily and weekly figures in the press. This explains the surprisingly prompt swing to relief and thanksgiving before the end of that month.

Table 3.1

1849	cholera+diarrhoea	cholera
Jan	1468	658
Feb	1069	371
Mar	1010	302
Apr	773	107
May	1048	327
Jun	2972	2046
Jul	9694	7570
Aug	19471	15872
Sep	25307	20379
Oct	6898	4654
Nov	1715	844
Dec	755	163

Source: William Farr, Report of the Mortality of Cholera in England 1848-9 London 1852, p.20.

However, although overall mortality was lower in 1853/4, the third epidemic was actually more severe in Newcastle and parts of London than in 1849, and inflicted similarly steep rises in mortality without eliciting a comparable religious response [94]. In 1854 newspapers showed a more secular response from editors, against a background of diminishing interest in the subject on the part of both editors and correspondents. However, persistence of religious perceptions of cholera in correspondence and in one notable editorial shows that the espousal of more secular views of epidemic disease was by no means uniform at this time.

Does the overall pattern of response to cholera lend itself to an explanation in terms of a wider decline in religious belief and if so, what can be inferred about the process of secularization of thought? Or can the observed changes be more convincingly explained in other ways? The absence of a steady progression from more religious to more secular perceptions of cholera is not in itself conclusive

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[94] London areas with higher fatalities in 1853/4 included Westminster, Kensington, Camberwell, Bermondsey, Hanover Square (William Farr, Vital Statistics (1885) p.382)

evidence against a secularizing process being under way during this period. The less explicitly religious response to the first epidemic could in fact reflect the strength of religious faith at a time when such views were too widely accepted to receive public comment, rather than any dissent from orthodox views.

As we have seen, during the first epidemic perceptions of cholera both in editorials and by the middleclass readership of these papers, were predominantly political, economic and practical, but where cholera was viewed in a religious light, it fitted into a providential scheme in which a benevolent deity intermittently permitted such afflictions for the ultimate benefit of mankind. It was not seen as a uniquely threatening phenomenon nor regarded as specially sent by an intervening deity in judgement or as punishment. Cholera seemed no more imbued with meaning than other natural phenomena, though lessons could and should be drawn from all such afflictions. Responses during the early months of the second epidemic suggest this view was still prevalent in 1848. It was apparently not incompatible with the growth of new expectations regarding man's power over his environment, the result of more than half a decade of public health reform. It was widely believed that sanitary science could prevent or at least limit the spread of epidemics; this confidence seemed to survive the relatively high death rates recorded early in 1849.

However, in the dramatic change which overtook editorial perceptions of cholera in the summer of 1849, the epidemic was perceived as an act of divine intervention, with a clearly defined purpose of judgement and chastisement. In spite of the teachings of sanitary science, cholera came to be seen as mysterious, unpredictable and beyond merely human control. Supernatural aid was sought, and when the epidemic subsided, this was attributed to divine mercy, and taken as confirmation of the power of prayer. This view of cholera seems to have been determined by a different set of providential ideas referable to an interventionist deity, liable to suspend natural laws for purposes of punishment or reward, and a world-view centred upon the close relationship between human acts and divine responsiveness to them. While this was the dominant view in the daily press at this time, variations on these providential themes also appeared. The Morning Chronicle for example laid emphasis on providential action through the laws

governing health and disease, but a more active supernatural involvement seems to have been the majority view.

Four years later, cholera was seen in a new light yet again. Although actual causal mechanisms were admitted to be still obscure, confidence in society's ability to control epidemic disease was once more the dominant theme. Cholera was no longer inscrutable, it was claimed, but entirely predictable and controllable through known "predisposing conditions". Since providence was now seen to act through natural laws, emphasis shifted to explanations in terms of "second causes" rather than ultimate purpose. And because infringement of the laws governing health carried its own punishment, the need for explanation in terms of divine chastisement was correspondingly reduced. Providential control was thus distanced by physical laws, and the importance of human prayer diminished by the belief that God had empowered man to help himself. This distancing of providential action in the third epidemic was distinct from both the direct interventionism of the second, and the more passive and fatalistic acceptance of natural disasters in the first, the most significant development, perhaps, being a reduced sense of purpose in external events. The explicit removal of cholera from the category of phenomena requiring explanation in terms of divine intervention entailed a shift in the boundary between the supernatural and the mundane, and represents a retraction of the providential domain. Demands for national fasting or thanksgiving in relation to cholera disappeared from newspaper columns in 1854, though the nation continued to recognise supernatural involvement in other areas of national concern, such as war and the harvest, throughout that year.

Do these changes in the nature of providential ideas evoked by cholera reflect real movement in public attitudes, or were they the views of various individual leader-writers, prominent but not necessarily representative, at different times? Bearing in mind the element of editorial choice over which leader-writers to use for the occasion, there was scope even here for response to public mood. The contrasting conceptions of God's role presented during the successive outbreaks are certainly suggestive of the involvement of different individuals, but the emergence of a similar pattern in editorials and correspondence in several publications indicates that this is unlikely to be the whole explanation. The nature

of the change in outlook between 1831 and 1849 is in fact consistent with the growing strength and changing character of evangelicalism during these years. By the late 1840s, an all-pervasive heightening of religious consciousness would have coloured perceptions of a national catastrophe such as cholera, and prompted more judgemental interpretations. But gradual changes in background opinion do not on their own satisfactorily explain the abrupt adoption of particular religious attitudes halfway through the second epidemic. Several factors probably acted simultaneously to produce the apparently sudden change in providential views. Firstly, the rising mortality during the summer months demonstrated all too clearly that sanitary measures were less effective than had been claimed. Confidence in man's mastery of zymotic disease would have been severely shaken, leaving individuals highly vulnerable to the doom-laden sermons preached from many London pulpits during the height of the epidemic. Since sermons were widely reported in newspapers and periodicals even non-attenders could have been affected. The evangelical newspaper, the Record, by ceaseless campaigning for national recognition of a "correct" view of cholera was responsible for increasing a sense of crisis and fear [95]. These various circumstances combined to allow emotive interpretations to be more widely entertained.

The new view adopted during the third epidemic seems to have evolved in a context signally lacking in scientific progress in the field, and with only minimal advances in effective preventive measures. Although certain individuals, notably Snow, had by 1854 published work to demonstrate that cholera was spread by a waterborne agent, contemporary newspapers as well as the medical literature show that this was not yet the accepted orthodoxy, or widely known even within the medical profession. However, a retrospective view is inevitably different from that of contemporary observers. It is clear that during both the second and the third epidemics, some aspects of cholera appeared comprehensible and controllable to sections of informed opinion. So although the decline of religious explanations and abandonment of recourse to supernatural aid in newspapers during 1853/4 cannot be convincingly explained in terms of "gaps" in human understanding being closed

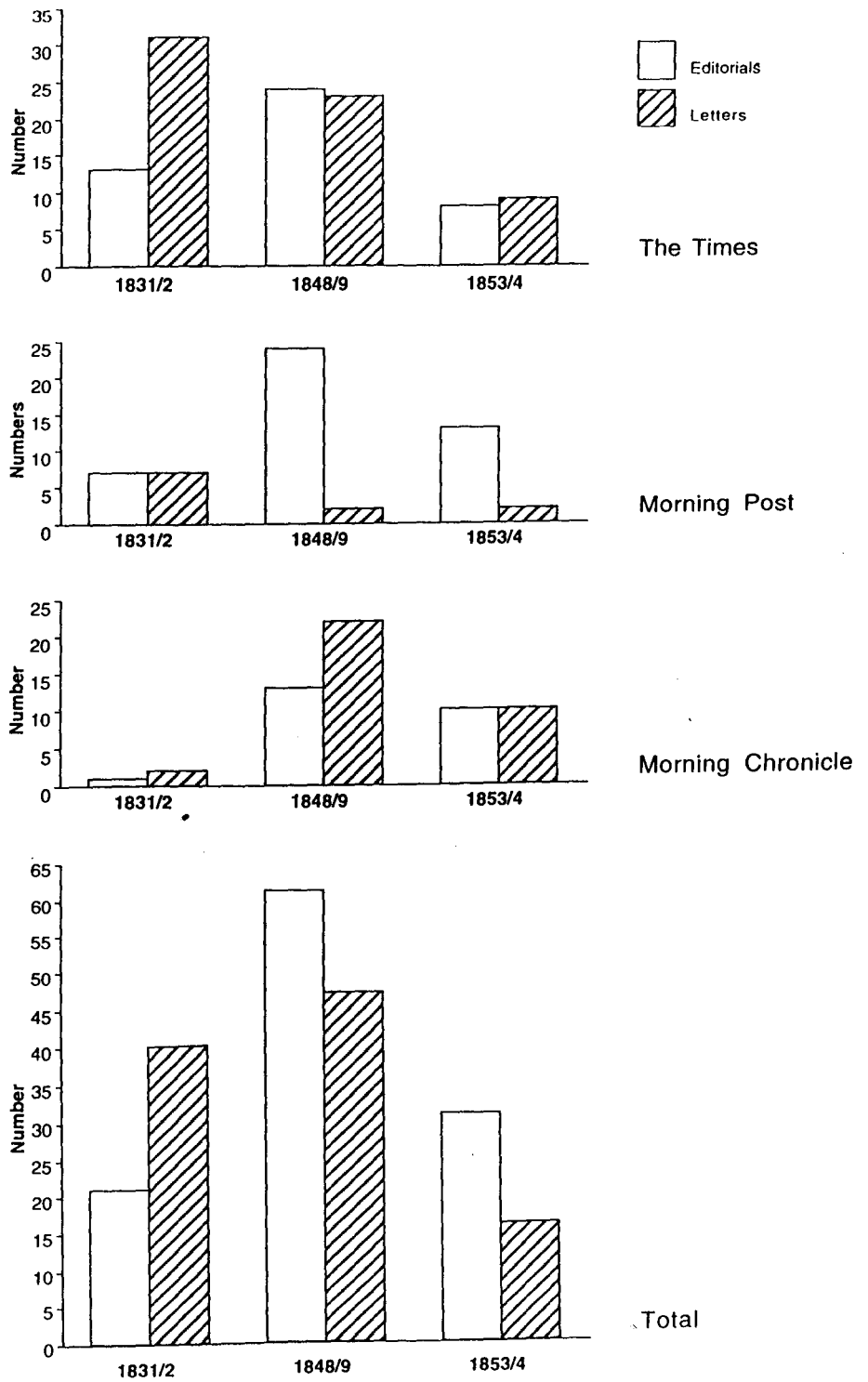
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[95] See Religious Periodicals, Chapter 4.

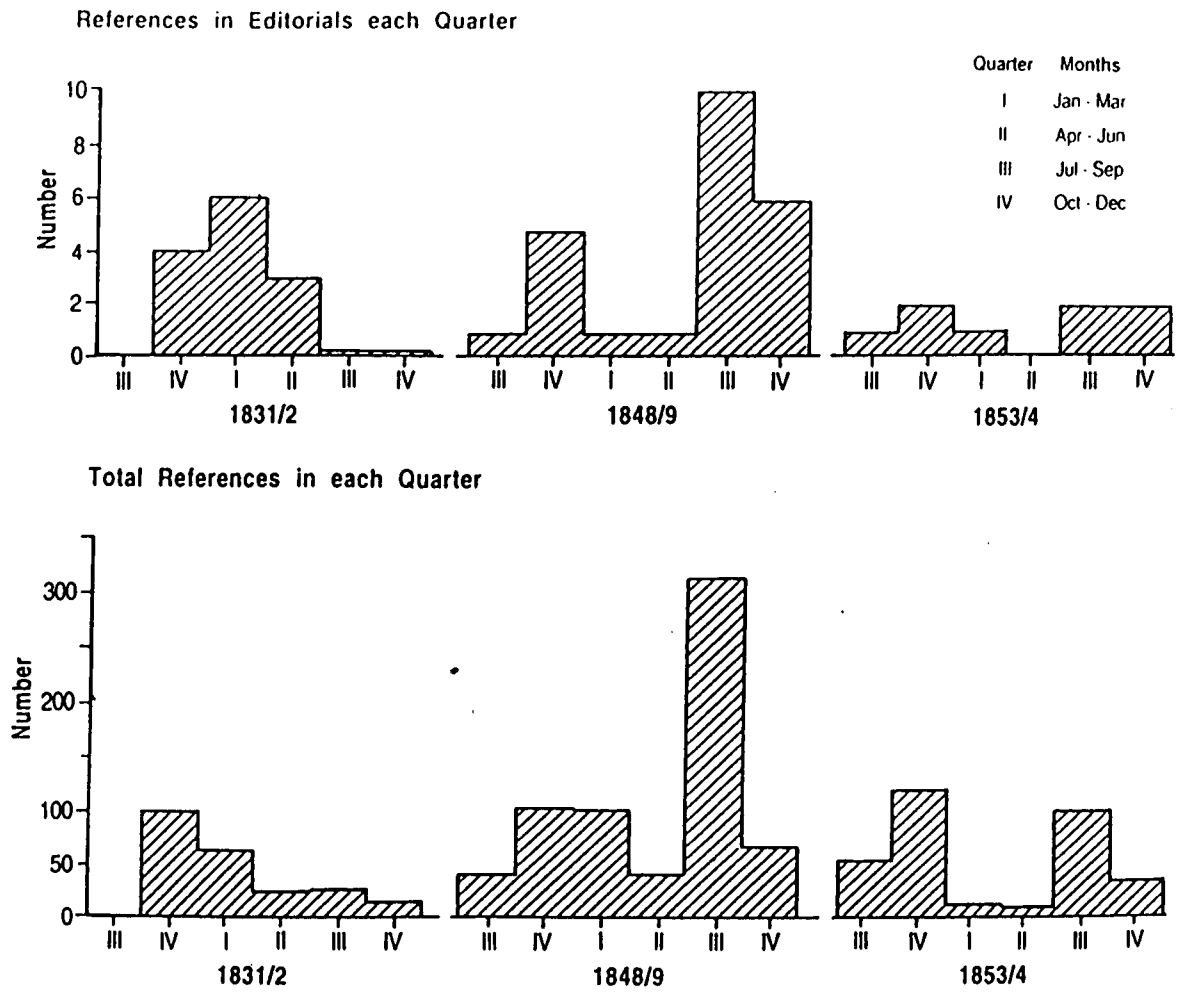
by medical advances, perceptions of increased control over the environment might have played a similar role [96]. However, even during the third epidemic sanitary measures do not seem to have been sufficiently effective in reducing mortality in London to account for the degree of change in attitude; it therefore seems that the emergence of a new view of cholera was at least in part the result of a shift in underlying preconceptions independent of relevant external circumstances.

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[96] Gilbert, The Making of Post-Christian Britain, chapter 1.



**Figure 3.1:** References to cholera in editorials and correspondence in three newspapers



**Figure 3.2:** The Times Index; references to cholera by annual quarter.



## Chapter 4

### RELIGIOUS PERIODICALS AND NEWSPAPERS

Victorian periodicals have long been recognised as an important source for historians of the nineteenth century [1]. For the "social historian of ideas" in particular it has been claimed that the periodical press is indispensable, reflecting more accurately than any other source material the climate of opinion within different social and ideological sections of the community at precise points in time [2]. Many amongst the multitude of different periodicals published during this period catered for clearly defined groups. Each of these publications can therefore provide access to a relatively consistent body of opinion which can be sampled at different times to identify trends. Knowledge of the publishing body and editorial staff of many periodicals allows a more accurate assessment of bias than do alternative sources of contemporary opinion gleaned from literature, reported conversation or correspondence in which the social and political parameters of authorship are often unverifiable.

In the study of religious opinion, the researcher is especially well served by the periodical press. Although there are conflicting estimates of the number, there is no doubt that religious publications formed a sizeable proportion of the total periodical press in the midcentury period. By analysing titles in the Waterloo Index, Altholz has arrived at the figure of 3000 for religious publications in existence between 1824 and 1900. He found that during the decade 1841-51, 149 out of a total of 845 could be classified as religious, that is, rather less than one fifth [3]. A considerably higher estimate has been made by Scott. Using figures from Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory of 1860, and quoting Altick's figures for 1873, Scott finds that religious periodicals represent approximately 50% of the

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[1] Walter Houghton, "Reflections on Indexing Victorian Periodicals", Victorian Studies vii (1963) p.192-6; M Wolff, "Charting the Golden Stream", Victorian Periodicals Newsletter 13 (1971) p.23-38; J Altholz, The Religious Press in Britain 1760-1900 (Westport 1989).

[2] Ellegård, Darwin and the General Reader (1958) Preface; Readership of the Periodical Press in Mid-Victorian Britain (Göteborg 1975).

[3] Altholz, The Religious Press in Britain, p.2.

market, the actual numbers of religious periodicals being 179 and 253 for the two dates respectively [4]. If religious publications did indeed represent half the periodical press at this time, then Wolff's discovery of at least 2000 periodicals running between 1861 and 1865 [5], gives the considerably higher figure of one thousand religious periodicals for those years.

While it will never be possible to arrive at precise numbers because of the frequent changes of name and faltering publishing history of many of the smaller journals, it is clear that there were enormous numbers of religious periodicals available at this time. The size of the public reached by this section of the press, and consequently the scale of its potential influence, were clearly of great significance [6]. Elliott-Binns has commented on "the immense and often malignant power exercised by the religious press" during the first part of the nineteenth century [7], echoing the view of a contemporary observer in Fraser's Magazine of 1838: "the religious press is possessed of great power...and reaches an extensive circle of readers [but] with the exception of one dissenting paper...are open and uncompromising advocates of the conservative principle" [8].

If this indicates that the religious press purveyed a limited range of political opinion, the same cannot be said of their theological views. The religious ferment of the midcentury period generated a multiplicity of religious viewpoints, leading to a proliferation of publications representing not merely every sect and denomination, but all shades of opinion within each major group. While this provides an abundance of source material, what Scott has described as the "bewildering fluidity" of this section of the press could in fact hinder the tracing of particular ideas over a period of time. On a more general level, the extent to which the religious press reflected more fundamental trends has also been questioned.

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[4] P Scott, "Richard Cope Morgan, the religious press and the Pontifex factor", Victorian Periodicals Newsletter 16 (1972) p.1.

[5] Wolff, "Charting the golden stream", p.29.

[6] Estimates of periodical circulation are given by Wolf, "Charting the golden stream"; Ellegård, "Readership of the periodical press", Victorian Periodicals Newsletter 13 (1971) p.3-22.

[7] L E Elliott-Binns, Religion in the Victorian Era (1946) p.332.

[8] Fraser's Magazine 18 (1838) p.330-8.

Altholz has suggested that taken as a whole it was relatively unresponsive, on the grounds that religious publishing continued to expand until the end of the century, masking the decline in religious activity that followed the religious revival of the early and midcentury years. Patrick Scott, on the other hand, feels that changes in religious consciousness were mirrored more rapidly in the periodicals than in ecclesiastical organisations. However, he also maintains that subscribers to periodicals were able to find a "more stable statement of their beliefs in their chosen magazine than in the disputed formularies of the church they attended" [9]. This suggestion may point to an explanation for the different pattern of response to the cholera epidemics exhibited by religious periodicals and sermons.

The hypothesised close relationship between the individual conscience and the doctrinal contents of the periodical subscribed to has been commented on by several writers. Subscription to a particular publication served as a "religious self-identification", the periodical providing a symbol by which a certain religious position could be defined and adherence to a particular movement affirmed. In this sense Altholz's contention that periodicals "preached to the converted", is no doubt valid [10]. However, while readers chose their periodical for a particular doctrinal position, there would be areas peripheral to their main interests where an identity of view between reader and writer did not pertain. In such areas the reader would be exposed to, and could be influenced by, new ideas presented in a favourable and persuasive context.

Whatever the exact balance between the extent to which they led and formed, or merely reflected, public opinion, religious periodicals are clearly a promising field in which to search for evidence of systematic change in religious thought. Accordingly, following Wolff's dictum that "the basic unit for the study of Victorian cultural history is the individual issue of a Victorian periodical" [11], a systematic survey of a sample of religious periodicals was undertaken for the period of the three major cholera epidemics, 1831-54. By monitoring attitudes

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[9] P Scott in "Victorian religious periodicals: fragments that remain" Studies in Church History xi (1975) 328-30.

[10] Altholz, The Religious Press (1989) p.142.

[11] Wolff, "Charting the golden stream", p.27.

expressed in this range of publications, a picture of the changing perceptions of the religious significance and degree of supernatural involvement in the epidemic can be drawn to illuminate the underlying conceptions of divine providence central to this study.

The choice of periodicals for this study was initially limited to those in continuous publication during the first three cholera epidemics between 1831 and 1854, and available within the libraries of Oxford and London. With regard to the need to cover as broad a range of religious opinion as possible, it was later found necessary to relax the first of these conditions in order to include valuable material in periodicals with shorter or incomplete runs. Both contemporary and more recent sources were used to identify periodicals in publication during the relevant years and to provide information on their social and religious characteristics. Several anonymous review articles from the later nineteenth century were particularly useful [12]. The search resulted in a total of thirty religious publications covering at least two of the epidemics [13]. Six of these were monthlies of comparable format and available for the full twenty four years, and so appropriate for a separate quantitative study. This group embraced a range of theological opinion, and included the Christian Observer (Arminian Evangelical Church of England, said to present Evangelicalism at its most respectable and intelligent, and appealing to clergymen of Evangelical opinion); the Evangelical Magazine (nonconformist Evangelical Alliance); Wesleyan Methodist Magazine (Arminian Methodism); Christian Guardian (Evangelical Church of England, moderate Calvinist); Christian Reformer (previously Monthly Repository, Unitarian); Baptist Magazine (Mainstream Particular). These six monthlies and the many short-lived periodicals not available for the full twenty-four year period form the basis for the main study, which also included a limited number of periodicals without a definite religious attachment or purpose. Several "family" magazines such as Chambers's Journal, from 1832, intended for the artisan class, and The Family Herald which

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[12] These included: Francis Hitchan, "The Penny Press", Macmillan's Magazine 43 (1881); "The religious periodical press", Fraser's Magazine 18 (1838); "The religious press", Dublin Review 6 (1881).

[13] A full list of publications surveyed appears in the bibliography.

began publication in 1842, aimed at a lower educational group, and popular with female domestics. These, with the well-established Gentleman's Magazine, afford a useful comparison with explicitly religious publications.

Religious newspapers did not become a significant feature of the market until later in the century, though the thrice-weekly Record, which was the best-selling evangelical publication during the 1830s, and the weekly Wesleyan Methodist Watchman were early exceptions and provide interesting comparisons with the major secular newspapers surveyed in Chapter 3. The Record was the organ of the evangelical party of the Church of England, read by middle- to upper-class Low Churchmen. The Watchman was of a fairly high educational standard, read by ministers and leading Methodists; circulations of these papers in 1855 were four thousand and three thousand respectively [14].

All issues of the periodicals selected were scanned for references to cholera in their editorials, "news" sections and correspondence columns, for eighteen months from the start of each of the cholera epidemics of 1831/2, 1848/9 and 1853/4. Note was made of all types of comment on the epidemic, from the purely secular or factual to the predominantly moral or religious view of the disease, so that any shift in conceptions of providential action would be exposed within the spectrum of opinion. In addition to the general survey, a small quantitative study of the six monthly periodicals named above was undertaken in order to provide numerical data for analysis, and to validate the necessarily more impressionistic results derived from traditional methods of assessing change. Each reference to cholera was coded according to a four-point system designed to measure the degree of providential thinking displayed, ranging from **s**, an entirely secular comment such as Board of Health advice or mortality figures, to **p+**. The coding **ps** denotes a comment in which a secular statement was qualified by a religious or moral reference, such as:

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[14] Information on periodicals provided by: R Taylor "English Baptist periodicals 1790-1865" Baptist Quarterly XXVII (1977); Ellegård "The readership of the periodical press"; G F A Best "The Evangelicals and the established Church in early nineteenth-century England", Journal of Theological Studies new ser. X (1959) p.63-78; Altholz, The Religious Press; F Mineka, The Dissidence of Dissent, (Chapel Hill 1944).

while it is desirable for medical practitioners...to avail themselves of practical experience...it also becomes us to regard with adoring gratitude the great forbearance of our heavenly father in causing the visitation to be so slight, considering our great wickedness as a nation [15]

A simple assumption of divine causation or recommendations of purely spiritual remedies was scored **p**, as in:

a destructive rod of fearful potency is thus held over the land. Hitherto the Lord has had pity upon the people. Let us still hope in his mercy to restrain and speedily avert this calamity [16]

More vehement insistence on the purely supernatural nature of the infliction, or denials of natural causation were scored **p+**, as in the following:

Shall such a disease then be traced to mere natural and incidental causes... No! One would rather trace it to its prime and original causes, to the fountain and first mover of all causes, and view it as a judgement from the almighty for the sin of which we as a nation are guilty...[17]

Because of the variable amount of space allotted to correspondence and editorial material in different periodicals, the number of cholera references referred to in the quantitative study is a total score and does not distinguish between contributions from editor and correspondent, though of course these different viewpoints provide useful information at a qualitative level. The results of the quantitative study are displayed in the bar charts below (pp.97-8). The four scores were plotted for each of the three epidemics to allow a visual comparison of the changing perception of cholera by each of the six periodicals over this period of time. These results are discussed within the main text.

### The First Cholera Outbreak

The response of the religious press to the first cholera epidemic was characterised by a widespread acceptance of the traditional association between epidemic disease and divine judgement. The early categorization of cholera as an example of the "scourge" or "pestilence" of biblical history led naturally to a providential

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[15] Wesleyan Methodist Magazine Letter (June 1832).

[16] Wesleyan Methodist Magazine "Retrospect of Public Affairs" (1832) p.534.

[17] Evangelical Magazine (September 1832) p.382.

interpretation which supplied both an explanation for the infliction, and a prescription for averting or curtailing its dire consequences. The perception of cholera as a "sore judgement" for national and personal iniquities was not at this time controversial, as it was later to become, and in the majority of the religious monthlies remained the predominant interpretation of the epidemic. It was not however the only aspect to receive comment; in most publications, references to cholera ranged from the purely secular, such as mortality statistics, to exclusively religious assertions of divine judgement for specific sins. The bar charts show that except in the case of the Christian Reformer, a simple providential interpretation was the most common type of response, resulting in a similar profile for five of the periodicals.

On the question of causation, it was frequently simply assumed that a phenomenon as mysterious and devastating must be divinely sent. When supernatural causation was not at issue, comment tended to focus on identifying the purpose of the infliction in order to ensure the correct human response was made. Where evidence for divine involvement was deemed necessary, a variety of arguments was presented, including scriptural analogies, the sinful state of the nation, and human powerlessness to combat it. "The failure of science" was frequently cited in this context:

a disease which mocks all the investigations of science and defies in almost every case all human aid - which moves by no law traceable by the most careful collation of facts, and leaves every place and person uncertain as to the probability of infection [18]

it is one of those cases in which every man must feel how completely we are at the disposal of the Almighty Power and how liable is human skill to be baffled by causes beyond our vision or control [19]

The helplessness of medical science in particular was seen as a reason for seeking divine rather than medical aid:

the speculation of medical and scientific men have been so completely baffled...that it becomes us to look to a higher agency than the hand

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[18] Wesleyan Methodist Magazine "Retrospect of Public Affairs" (May 1832).

[19] Christian Observer "View of Public Affairs" (June 1831).

of man [20]

This failure also became the basis of more assertive statements which explicitly excluded any natural explanation for what was claimed to be an entirely supernatural phenomenon, as exemplified by this rhetorical question in the Evangelical Magazine:

Shall such a disease then be traced to mere natural and incidental causes...  
No! One would rather trace it to its prime and original causes, to the fountain and first mover of all causes, and view it as a judgement from the Almighty for the sin of which we, as a nation, are guilty [21]

Comments showing such insistence on purely supernatural causation of the epidemic were generally outnumbered by less dogmatic perceptions of providential involvement, as well as by those which attempted to combine a religious view with practical or scientific approaches to the disease. The latter typically featured both moral and physical causes in their explanations of the affliction, or recommended prayer and bodily cleanliness as equally appropriate remedies.

There were, however, some notable exceptions to the general pattern which emerged during the first epidemic. These included the Christian Remembrancer, the organ of the High Church anti-Evangelical party, which contained only secular references to the disease, and also the Christian Reformer and the General Baptist Advocate. The latter two, both Unitarian journals, explicitly denied that the epidemic was an instance of divine intervention, and opposed the holding of a National Fast in highly critical terms, alleging that it originated

with certain pretenders to evangelical superiority, who by their inveterate opposition to national improvement have helped to occasion the ignorance and consequent vice which they would now make the grounds of national humiliation, and represent as a divine judgement the misery and disease to which their own measures have mainly conducted [22]

This was not a commonly expressed view at this time. While it was not unusual, especially in the secular press, for the uniqueness and seriousness of the epidemic

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[20] New Baptist Miscellany (1832).

[21] Evangelical Magazine September 1832 p.382.

[22] This appeared in both Christian Reformer, 1832 p.142, and General Baptist Advocate, 1832 p.61.



to be disputed, cholera was rarely explicitly denied a divine significance except by avowed freethinkers in such radical publications as the Poor Man's Guardian.

A further exception to the general pattern occurred in several of the small high Calvinist Baptist periodicals [23], but here the supernatural interpretation was not eschewed in favour of a secular one; the subject was simply ignored. This curious avoidance of a subject which preoccupied both the religious and secular press persisted during the succeeding epidemics. An explanation must be sought in the specific social and theological characteristics of this distinctive group of believers. Their espousal of the Calvinist doctrine that "human exhortations are an interference in the right of a sovereign God to save whosoever He will" [24] would have affected attitudes towards the holding of Fasts and special prayers, but does not explain their total silence on the subject of cholera.

The only religious newspaper available at this time, the evangelical Record, paid great attention to all aspects of cholera throughout the first epidemic. There were regular factual/statistical bulletins, as well as frequent references to religious and moral aspects of the disease in both editorials and correspondence. Purely religious comments were roughly balanced by the number which attempted to integrate practical and spiritual aspects within a religious framework. An example of this approach was an editorial of November 1831, which concluded its examination of the question of contagion in relation to cholera with an exhortation to prayer and repentance as the most appropriate remedy. During the first epidemic it was only when cholera was discussed within the context of "infidel" France did the Record promulgate a more extreme form of providentialism. On this occasion the editor insisted on recognition of God's hand, rather than "secondary causes", as the determining factor which had ended the relatively mild affliction visited upon England as compared with France [25].

In neither of the general periodicals surveyed during the first epidemic, the

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[23] Such as Gospel Herald and Gospel Standard.

[24] R W Oliver, "The emergence of a Strict and Particular Baptist community 1777-1850", unpublished PhD thesis CNA (1986), regards this doctrinal premise as central to the High Calvinism of the Strict Baptists at this time.

[25] Record editorial 21 November 1832.

Gentleman and Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, did cholera become a prominent issue, and the uniformly brief comment was limited to statistics and medical aspects of the disease.

### The Second Epidemic

The religious periodical press responded rather differently to the second cholera epidemic which struck seventeen years later. The most significant change, as clearly shown in the bar graphs, was the dramatic reduction in the amount of space devoted to cholera in the majority of the religious periodicals quantitatively studied. However, although the number of references to the subject was much lower, there was no significant change in the overall pattern of response. Analysis of the full range of periodicals shows that many of the views and comments expressed during the first epidemic reappeared in 1848/9, and in similar proportions. These findings are in marked contrast with the results of the newspaper survey, in which both volume and type of response changed significantly between 1832 and 1848/9.

Examining the response of individual periodicals, it was found that the strict Calvinist Baptists, in the Gospel Herald and the Gospel Standard continued to ignore the subject, but that in the Baptist Reporter, the General Baptist Repository and the Church, which were organs of the General Baptists, there was evidence of increased interest in the religious aspect of the epidemic. An editorial of 1849 in the Church insisted on the reality of "divine judgement and divine chastisement" in the epidemic, refuting "the scoffs of infidel papers" to the contrary [26]. And in an article entitled "The Voice of God in his Extraordinary Visitation" the Baptist Reporter claimed that cholera remained

an awful mystery...baffling the skill of our most practised physiologists...a signal rebuke and chastisement...leaping forth from the filthy abodes in which it delights to revel, into the parlour of the citizen, the hall of the noble...the wisest son of science should listen to that voice [27]

That these three periodicals were evangelical in outlook provides further support

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[26] Church 3 (1849) editorial p.261.

[27] Baptist Reporter November 1849 p.405.

for evangelicalism being a powerful determinant in the overall response to cholera, transcending other denominational or theological differences.

The Quaker periodicals the Friend, which commenced publication in 1843, and the British Friend, published in Glasgow, carried a small number of short scientific or medical articles on cholera, and several expositions of the Quakers' views on National Humiliation and Fasting, institutions to which they were implacably opposed. The only explicit reference to divine causation of cholera appeared in an editorial in 1849, which concluded:

while acknowledging the hand of the Creator and faith in His immediate providence [we are] not precluded from enquiring into the secondary causes [28]

This qualified reference to supernatural involvement was a rare exception to the usually entirely secular treatment of the subject in Quaker journals. Although the relationship between death, disease and providence remained of vital concern in Quaker diaries and biographies at this time, cholera seemed to be perceived as spiritually distinct from other bodily afflictions. The generally higher educational standing of Quakers may be relevant here. Awareness of the scientific yet pious position adopted by the Quaker doctor Thomas Hodgkin during the first epidemic could also have been influential in spreading more enlightened attitudes towards cholera within the Quaker community. In a letter to the Board of Health in 1832, and in his article "Hints relating to cholera in London", Thomas Hodgkin repeatedly advocated a more scientific approach to epidemic disease:

if we neglect to observe and record the facts connected with the present epidemic, we shall not only ourselves hereafter have a cause to regret the omission, but it will tarnish upon our character in the eyes of posterity that we did not take advantage of our opportunity [29]

Quaker attitudes, like those of other religious groups for whom sickness and death were of great spiritual significance, must also have been affected by the physical nature of this disease. Because of the rapid and painful decline into insensibility, cholera did not often allow the customary deathbed exchanges between the dying

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[28] Friend 7/8 (1849/50) editorial p.189.

[29] Thomas Hodgkin, "Hints relating to cholera in London", 1832.

person and their family, making "sanctification" of the event for the spiritual edification of the bereaved very difficult.

The Record newspaper did not share the declining concern with cholera shown by the religious monthlies, but maintained the keen interest apparent during the first epidemic. There was again a wide variety of response, but as before, providential interpretations predominated. In fact, the proportion of ultra-providential comments was higher, and those combining religious and secular views rather lower, than during the first epidemic. An increasing concern with religious and moral aspects of the disease at a time when sanitary and medical advances in this area were receiving greater publicity, is a paradoxical finding, but as was shown by the newspaper survey, far from unique. Although some of the religious concerns were voiced in both secular and religious newspapers, notably the desire for a national gesture of humiliation, the Record's correspondence suggested that its readers were less interested than those of the national secular press in practical prevention and sanitary matters. The bar charts for the Record show that both categories of providential-type response were more frequent during the second epidemic. The widespread demands for an officially-appointed day of prayer, the subject of much of this comment, did not achieve their end; the government did not authorize official recognition of God's role in the epidemic until cholera was on the wane, when a day of National Thanksgiving was proclaimed.

A providential view of cholera was also adopted in one of the general periodicals without specifically religious affiliations. The Family Herald, which described itself as "a domestic magazine of useful information and amusement", featured an article in September 1849 on the role of providence in sending disasters for moral improvement. Cholera was clearly a "judgement", this anonymous article declared, and although poor social conditions were also implicated, moral rather than physical means were prescribed for their alleviation; "Mere medical science will never be able to subdue a pestilence, and fortunate it is for us that it is so", it was argued, since this would defeat the purpose for which

the evil was imposed [30]. A leading article two years later shows that providential views were not invoked solely to interpret calamitous events. The main thrust of the article was a plea for a return to "a belief in universal Providence". It was asserted that the declining faith of the age, here equated with "theism", was accustoming people to attribute events to "blind chance" rather than to perceive them as "conducted behind the curtain by supernal Intelligence". This defence of a providential world order, made outside a specifically religious context, is a measure of the perceived threat of religious change, and also an example of contemporary perceptions of providence as the essence of a religious world view [31].

The response to the second epidemic by religious periodicals was thus characterised by an increase in more explicit providential interpretations of cholera in a few of these publications, against a background declining interest. Unlike in the secular press, concern with sanitary developments made minimal contribution to the debate. Growing awareness of the importance of purely practical factors in causing and alleviating epidemic disease might be expected to have had the effect of removing the subject from periodicals devoted to purely spiritual and moral matters, but in newspapers, both religious and secular, the two approaches to cholera enjoyed increased publicity simultaneously during the second epidemic, a phenomenon also reflected in the comments of the Family Herald.

### The Third Epidemic

The four-year interval between the second and third epidemics seems to have had minimal effect upon the response of most of the religious periodicals surveyed. The volume of comment was only a little reduced from the 1848/9 levels, suggesting that the boredom factor alone was not responsible for the much larger decline in the seventeen years between the first and second episode. This pattern contrasts with the secular newspapers, where both the space accorded to cholera comment, and the views expressed on the subject, underwent significant change after 1849. However, nearly all the religious periodicals which had given space to

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[30] Family Herald September 1849 p.348.

[31] Family Herald August 1851 p.236.

the subject in earlier epidemics commented once again, and although numbers are too small for useful analysis, there is a suggestion of a minimal shift away from the purely religious towards more secular views of the disease. The Church, for example, which in 1849 had focused its editorial comment upon ideas of judgement and chastisement, widened its perspective in 1853 to include the physical causes of cholera:

while it obeys the will of Him who holds the keys of Hades and of death, it is yet quite clear that like most second causes it has prescribed laws, and that it is an awful warning against indulging in habits of indolent filth [32]

And the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine for the first time acknowledged sanitation to be a relevant factor:

While prayer has been offered to Him who alone can stay the destroying angel, greater attention is given than ever heretofore to such substantial and permanent measures of sanitary reform as may break the seed-plots of contagion. That famine, pestilence and sedition have not been let loose upon us is owing to the goodness and forbearance of Almighty God, to whom we invite readers to render special thanksgiving [33]

However, real interest in public health aspects of cholera never became a prominent feature in any of the religious monthlies and the response to the third epidemic in this section of the press was generally muted.

This is in contrast with reactions in the newspapers; as emerged in chapter 3, in secular newspapers the subject continued to be well covered and responses showed a definite shift of emphasis. Although not on the same scale, there was a similar development in the religious papers. The Methodist weekly newspaper the Watchman had already, in 1849, recognised the need to accommodate physical causes within its providential view, by proposing a formula with which the pious might counter the arguments of "materialist" scientists:

to those who believe natural causes to be bound by adamant chains and who yet admit a Providence or at least a deity, we would suggest that He fore-ordained that succession of causes and likewise saw the need [34]

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[32] Church, "Intelligence", October 1853 p.279.

[33] Wesleyan Methodist Magazine, Retrospect of Public Occurrences, December 1853.

[34] Watchman editorial 29 August 1849.

But by 1853 all reference to supernatural agency had been omitted and cholera was now described as merely "another test of our progress in application of the hygienic principle" [35], apparently demonstrating the influence of the changed climate of opinion. The non-religious weekly Family Herald also showed a shift in the same direction; in contrast with the providential interpretations offered during 1849 and 1851, comment on cholera during the third epidemic was restricted to material aspects of disease prevention, namely cleanliness and avoidance of alcohol.

This development was less evident in the Record newspaper. The bar chart on p.98 shows that although references to practical preventive measures were slightly more frequent, and exclusively supernatural interpretations rather fewer than in 1848/9, the Record continued to publicise a providential view of cholera. Lord Palmerston's letter to the Edinburgh Presbytery, in which he declined to nominate a special day for Fasting and Humiliation, provided a challenge to such a viewpoint that could not be ignored. The Record devoted an editorial to refuting the implications for traditional conceptions of providence of what it described as his "disgusting and painful" letter [36]. It was untrue, the editorial maintained, that God made laws and then abdicated sovereign control, or left his purposes to be carried out by the blind operation of second causes. While not denying the need for practical measures to counteract the epidemic, the editor pointed out that cholera was not caused by bad sanitary arrangements alone - it needed the confluence of many factors, atmospheric, climatic, and electrical for example, all of which were under God's control, not man's; hence the continuing need for appeals to divine mercy. The Record returned to the subject some days later to criticise a letter in The Times, which, in seconding Palmerston's position on fasts, had suggested that those demanding a return to national fasting were "trading in a reputation for piety". This second editorial [37] showed a slight change of position. Accepting that increasing medical knowledge had "transferred cholera from the class of mysterious visitations which God keeps in his own hand" to that

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[35] Watchman editorial 14 September 1853.

[36] Record editorial 31 October 1853.

[37] Record editorial 10 November 1853.

of "an evil dependent on our neglect of specific duties", it acknowledged some truth in Palmerston's letter. It maintained, however, that it was providence which taught what preventives to use once cholera had arrived, and continued to insist that "the cause of its periodical visitations is still veiled from us". The general tenor of its message was to warn against attributing too much to natural laws and so underestimating the role of moral law in the causation of disease. It concluded with the claim that:

A review of all features of Providence will furnish a full reply to those laborious excuses for refusing to humble ourselves [38]

It is clear that there had been no change in the Record's view on prayer and repentance as the appropriate response to epidemic disease. It also becomes apparent how closely entwined were the Record's two dominant concerns - the defence of the traditional doctrine of providence, and the duty of government to uphold Christian values by giving a spiritual lead to the country. Further analysis of The Record's response to cholera during the three epidemics shows that two subjects predominate over all others in both the correspondence columns and in editorials, namely the need to recognise the divine origin of the epidemic and the consequent duty of government to order national prayer and repentance. Individual prayer and repentance were also frequently alluded to, but did not achieve the prominence of demands for official observances. The pattern of different types of response in The Record in relation to demands for government or national action is shown in the chart on p.98. While there was a steady decrease in references to private prayer and repentance during the period, demands for national action peaked during the second epidemic. This level declined during the third epidemic, but it still remained the most common response. The Record's continuing preoccupation with the subject of a national response to the epidemics contrasts with the mood in the secular press; although several newspapers had shared this concern during the second epidemic, it was almost unmentioned thereafter.

### Conclusions

The findings of this survey of religious periodicals are more ambiguous than those

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[38] Record editorial 10 November 1853.



from the secular press, but are consistent with a shift in religious perceptions during the midcentury period. The emergence of several distinct patterns of change in the publications surveyed suggests that changes in religious consciousness varied between different religious groups. It also emerged that religious newspapers differed from periodicals in the type of response they elicited, and as will emerge later in Chapter 7, these were also at variance with the picture drawn from an analysis of sermons of this period.

At its first appearance cholera was widely portrayed in the religious press as a unique phenomenon of special significance and was initially only very rarely discussed in the context of other equally fatal prevailing diseases. Cholera even seemed to hold a special place *vis-a-vis* other epidemics. For example, the serious influenza epidemic which struck in the winter of 1847 was discussed entirely in terms of contagion without any reference to moral or religious aspects, in contrast with the treatment of cholera by the same periodical shortly after [39]. Where evidence is available, the majority of religious periodicals showed a tendency towards more secular views of cholera by the time of the third epidemic, but the paucity of comment during the latter makes the extent difficult to gauge. It was certainly an insignificant development compared with the decline in supernatural interpretations and corresponding rise in public health-based attitudes which characterised the response of the secular press to the third epidemic. The main interest of the findings of this survey lie in the failure of the religious press in general, with the notable exception of the Record, to pursue the subject after the first epidemic, and in the differences which emerged in the pattern and rate of change between the different publications.

To deal first with the negative findings: there were some periodicals which showed either no change over the period, or which made no comment upon the subject of cholera. One reason for the strict Calvinist Baptist journals virtually ignoring the epidemics may lie in the predominantly rural membership of these sects. For many of these, cholera must have seemed a remote threat of little direct relevance to their daily lives. Such communities were not only physically isolated,

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[39] Watchman 7 December 1847.

but fostered a psychological separation, described by William Hale White as "clanship, a society marked off from the great world" [40]. This isolation was enhanced by the nature of their inward-looking faith. A preoccupation with the eternal workings of providence would render a phenomenon as transitory as a cholera epidemic insignificant. Furthermore, public gestures of repentance and supplication might well have seemed irrelevant to those whose world-view was dominated by the tenet of absolute predestination. Another factor was that one of the most frequent of the religious references to cholera, the demand for government recognition of divine involvement and the need for national penitence, could be seen as verging on political activism, a course less likely to be pursued by politically marginal small sects than by mainstream evangelicals flexing their political muscle.

The divergence between the newspapers and the religious monthlies was one of the most interesting features of the response to the second cholera epidemic. Although there was no major change in the type of comment recorded in religious periodicals between the first and second epidemics, there was an enormous difference in the amount of space devoted to the subject by the secular newspapers and the Record on one hand, and most of the religious press on the other. The fact that the former publications had little in common apart from being newspapers, raises the question of whether the medium was itself a contributing causal factor. The newspaper format and ethos, and the frequency of publication would certainly have allowed more effective and wider coverage of a dramatic and fast-changing subject like cholera. In contrast, monthly magazines were necessarily less able to make a rapid response to current events, even when they were not, as many of these journals were, more concerned with the eternal verities than with immediate worldly affairs. Clearly this cannot provide an explanation for the stronger response of the monthlies to the first epidemic, unless there had been some change in the relative positions of these sections of the press during this period.

There is in fact evidence that changes in the stamp tax as well as technical

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[40] W Hale White conveys a powerful impression of social and intellectual isolation in his own upbringing in a Puritan community in Bedford in Mark Rutherford (1881).

innovations in the printing industry, which affected the press as a whole, were beginning to impinge on the religious press at this time. The year in which stamp duty was repealed, 1855, is often taken as the watershed, but in reality many of the developments were accelerations of changes already under way [41]. Scott has drawn attention to the effects of these changed market conditions upon the religious press. Some periodicals responded by imitating the secular newspapers, others by evolving a different style within the traditional monthly format, including the publishing of more divergent views in signed articles [42].

Another response was to cease publication. The Christian Guardian explained its action in the final issue of 1853 as due to:

the perfectly altered state of the times in which we live ...the non-adaptation of a mere monthly theological magazine to meet the requirements of the church...or the needs of its members...now the press teems with religious essays, sermons, biographies...a monthly gathering of such subjects is comparatively unnecessary [43]

It therefore seems probable that to some extent, the response of the monthly periodicals to the second epidemic reflected the growing divergence in function between the religious monthlies and newspapers. Unable to compete with the burgeoning field of newspapers, the religious monthlies retreated within a more "timeless" mould, and abandoned comment on current affairs to the newspaper press. Bulwer-Lytton has drawn the distinction between newspapers and periodicals, that "monthly and quarterly reviews were conducted to form public opinion [whereas] newspapers did little more than reflect it" [44]. If this has any relevance to the less intellectually heavyweight periodicals sampled here, it suggests that after 1832, the editors of the religious periodical press no longer felt that they could influence the minds of their readers by drawing lessons from the

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[41] M Harris and Alan Lee, eds, The Press in England from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century (1986) p.107.

[42] Scott, "Victorian Religious Periodicals", p.325-339.

[43] Quoted by J Ellis and M Wolff, "The Christian Guardian in 1853: an unrecorded volume", Victorian Periodicals Newsletter 16 (1972) p.51.

[44] Quoted by Ivan Asquith, "The structure, ownership and control of the press 1780-1855" in G Boyce et al. eds, Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day (1978) p.108.

subject of cholera.

As we have seen, the sanitary movement appeared to make little impact upon perceptions of cholera in the religious press. There were faint indications in several of the monthlies of a growing awareness of the mundane nature of epidemic disease, but the decline in publication of religious interpretations rather than the appearance of new attitudes was the main indication of change. In contrast with the more secular attitudes now strongly in evidence in the national newspapers, the change in the response of the Record was minimal. The Record's reaction to Palmerston's letter has suggested that one factor may have been the Record's position as spokesman of the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church. The need to lead public opinion and defend the central evangelical tenets would have tended towards consolidation and perpetuation of traditional views rather than an openness to new, and possibly divisive, ideas. This effect would have been enhanced by the unbroken editorship of a single individual, Alexander Haldane, who by this time had reached a position of great eminence and was regularly consulted by evangelicals on all important questions [45].

The extent to which the Record's perception of cholera reflected or dominated that of its readers is difficult to gauge. The large circulation suggests at the least that such views were not unacceptable to a considerable section of the reading public [46]. A critical review of the religious press in the Dublin Review a little later in the century commented that the Record's theological outlook, and specifically its conception of providential action in momentous events, had not changed since its establishment in 1828. In the context of a recent shipping disaster, it claimed: "this view of the Divine nature and purposes appears to be that most in favour with its readers [being] identical with their usual interpretation of current events" [47]. However, The Times was also supposed to have reflected the views of its readers and to have been prepared to follow changes in public

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[45] Rennie, "Evangelicalism and English public life" (1962) is an important source for the Record during this period.

[46] Fraser's Magazine 1838 credited the Record with "the largest circulation" of comparable publications; Ellegård (1971) gives the figure of 4,000 for 1855.

[47] Anon review in the Dublin Review 6 (1881) p.1-28.

opinion at the cost of consistency. So we can assume that the swing away from providential interpretations towards a more practical and scientific approach during the third epidemic was a measure of changing attitudes amongst a different constituency of readers. The development of a conception of divine action which could accommodate the now indisputable role of man in causing and preventing epidemic disease, the clearest exposition of which was given by The Times [48], was never recognised by the Record. The distancing or diluting of the traditional view of the role of providence in epidemics, by which moral purpose could be retained without the need for explanation in terms of direct supernatural intervention, was apparently readily assimilated into the religious world view of The Times' readers. The absence of a similar development in the outlook of the Record and its supporters is clearly germane to an understanding of the mechanics of religious change.

The coming of age of sanitary science coincided with a rise in a new kind of evangelical activity during the midcentury years, so perceptions of cholera at this time may be the result of the interaction of two powerful but conflicting influences. Hempton has defined this change towards a narrower evangelicalism in terms of Calvinism, anti-rationalism, anti-Catholicism, biblical literalism and premillennialism [49]. A "narrowness and rigidity in its teachings" and a tendency to pursue its doctrines to "extravagant lengths" was the judgement of a contemporary observer, Conybeare, who singled out the "Recordite party" in particular as responsible for promoting this development [50]. Specifically evangelical ideas about the "righteous nation" and the role of God in history identified by Best are also clearly relevant to the providential interpretations and demands for government action published in the Record [51]. By the midcentury, this section of evangelical thought had become deeply conservative, and although no longer hyper-Calvinist in doctrine, retained a strong belief in

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[48] See Chapter 3.

[49] D N Hempton, "Evangelicalism and eschatology", Journal of Ecclesiastical History xxxi (1980) p.179-94.

[50] Conybeare, "Church Parties" (1853).

[51] Best, "The Evangelicals and the Established Church" (1959).

biblical inerrancy. At the time when awareness of Biblical criticism from Germany was becoming more widespread, enabling many to adopt less rigid views on biblical literalism, the Record made the contentious statement "the system of graduated inspiration is now happily exploded", so justifying their holding to a view of the Bible as divinely inspired throughout [52].

The issue of biblical inerrancy could have affected attitudes to cholera in several ways. It is possible that a strong faith in the literal truth of the Bible resulted in less sophisticated believers rejecting any explanation of the epidemics which appeared to conflict with, or was not sanctioned by, scripture. In contrast, the perceived threat to the authority of scripture could also have led to cholera being used to demonstrate the reality of biblical inspiration, and bolster the faith of those exposed to doubt. These different reactions mirror the wider question of whether the strength of the evangelical response to the epidemics should be seen as evidence of increasing confidence within a growing movement, for whom cholera was an opportunity to impose greater piety upon an erring society. Alternatively, it may have resulted from an awareness of imminent decline in the influence of traditional Christianity, an example of the reaction described by a contemporary as the imperative to maintain the public "forms" of religion largely because "the soul has departed" [53].

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[52] The Record 1850, quoted by Rennie, "Evangelicalism and English public life" (1962).

[53] Dublin Review 6 (1881) p.1-28.

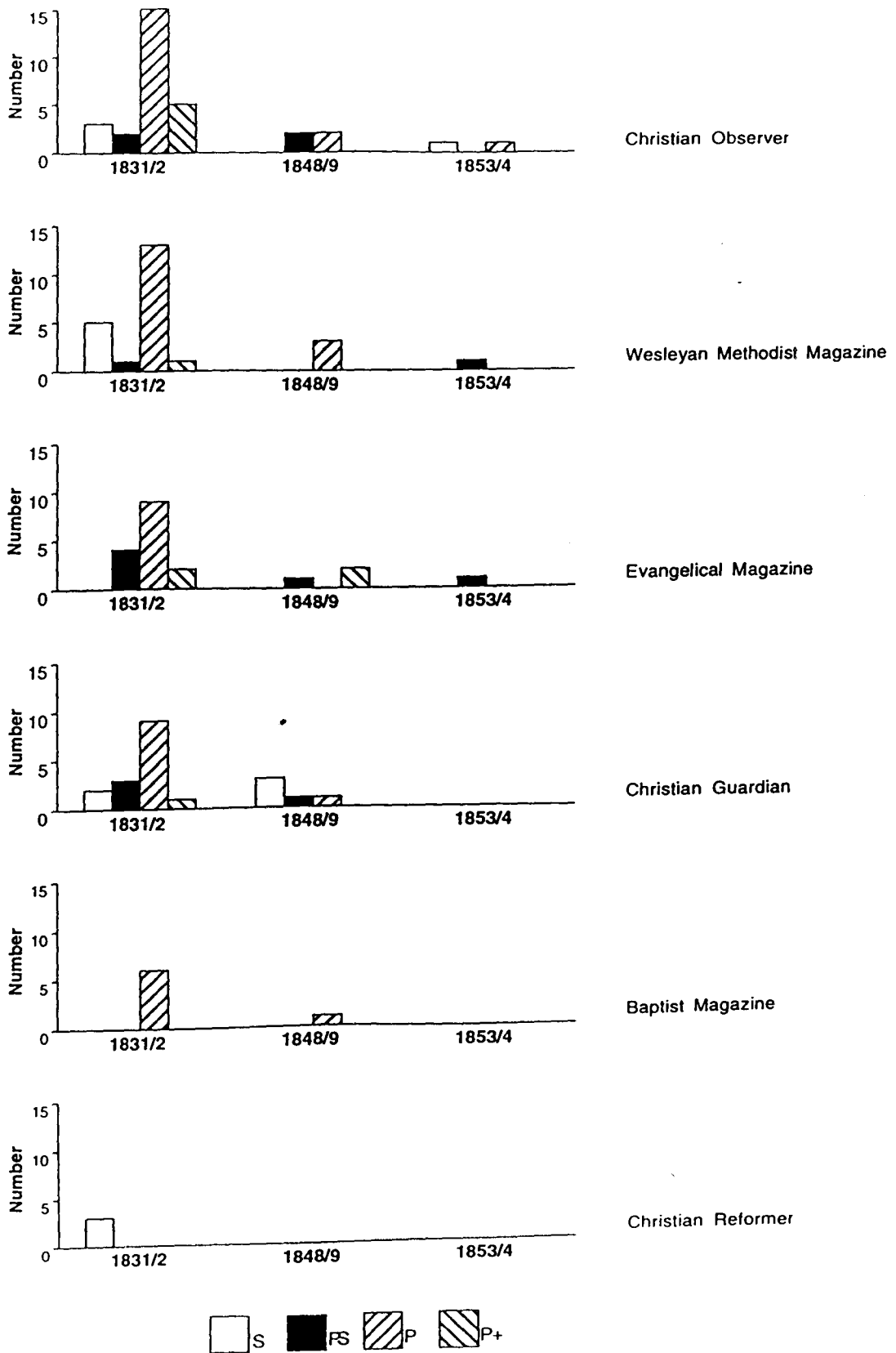
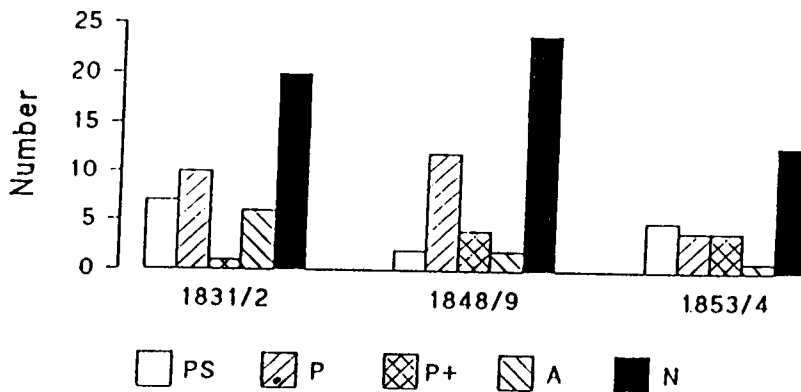


Figure 4.1: Responses to cholera in religious periodicals (see pages 79-80).

### The Record



**Figure 4.2:** This chart shows the pattern of responses in the **Record** during each of the three epidemics. The first three columns are the **ps**, **p** and **p+** profiles as scored for the six monthly periodicals; **s** scores have been omitted for this publication because, as a twice-weekly newspaper, mortality figures and Board of Health notices were published regularly in almost every issue, and so showed no variation over the time period.

The **A** and **N** scores are the numbers of references to the need for prayer and repentance, **A** being for personal or private supplication, **N** for public or national acts of fasting and humiliation, government-sponsored special days and services etc.



## Chapter 5

### DOMESTIC MISSIONS

Evidence of change in religious consciousness during the midcentury decades has so far been sought in the response to the cholera epidemics by religious periodicals and newspapers, and by the secular press. These sources have revealed significant developments, both in explicit statements of religious doctrine regarding providential action, and indirectly, in suggesting the changing religious attitudes which underlay much of the comment on cholera in editorials and correspondence. The striking differences which emerged between these two types of publication will be further explored in later chapters. While there was some overlap in the social groups involved, between them these publications served a large and varied readership. A large proportion of the public, however, which read neither periodical nor newspaper could not be directly influenced by editorial pronouncements nor express their views in correspondence columns. For the lower working classes, amongst whom literacy levels were low [1], there was at this time no equivalent publication from which information about prevailing religious ideas could be derived. But it was upon this section of the population, comprising the poorer and less literate classes, that cholera impinged most severely and it is clear that any survey of society's response to the epidemics would be incomplete without an account of the reactions of those most closely affected. Secularization theory, from a Weberian perspective, suggests that the need for religion is greatest amongst the powerless, and that in a modernising society religion will linger longest where existence is most precarious and individuals have least control over their destiny. An inexplicable disaster such as cholera might therefore be expected to evoke more extreme religious responses from those least able to understand or control events. It is therefore especially important to examine the reactions of the

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[1] The Registrar-General's figures for 1841 showed that 33% of men and 49% of women were unable to sign the marriage register [quoted in J W Dodds The Age of Paradox (1953) p.128]. The LCM missionary R W Vanderkiste estimated that only one in three of London adults could read, and fewer write, Notes and Narratives of a Six Year Mission (1852).

poorest sections of society, and in the absence of the sort of written record available for the middle classes, make use of alternative sources if changing attitudes across the whole spectrum of society are to be monitored.

Most of our knowledge of working class life during the midcentury years derives from the written evidence of contemporary middle class observers. Modern critics have expressed reservations about the reliability of such evidence especially in relation to a subject as intangible as religious belief. It is often assumed, on account of the cultural gap which separated a literate Victorian observer from this subject of study, that observations would have been flawed by less than perfect communication between the classes, and that perceptions would have been biased by differing cultural values. While it is clear that reporting upon subjective and controversial subjects will inevitably be vulnerable to unconscious distortion, it is possible to avoid some of the dangers of class-bias by seeking evidence from sources other than the middleclass clergymen and lady visitors most frequently quoted. To the extent that outward actions arise from and reflect individual psychological and intellectual characteristics, there is the possibility of using evidence of altered habits and patterns of behaviour to infer changing attitudes and beliefs. This is necessarily a simplistic and crude measure of an infinitely complex variable, but where relevant information is available, such as new patterns of church attendance or requests for clergymen to visit sick beds, it can be used to complement other evidence. The existence of a small number of working class autobiographies from the 1830-40s provides another source. Although these are clearly valuable social documents, they are, as the literary product of a minimally literate group, necessarily unrepresentative, and must be used with caution in inferring wider intellectual and religious developments. A third potential source arises from the abundant material documenting the lives of the poor gathered by a variety of individuals and charitable agencies later in the century. Amongst the copious information recorded by investigators such as Rowntree and Booth, occasional references are made to religious attitudes. Where these interviews explore childhood circumstances, information can be gleaned about religious attitudes prevalent amongst an earlier generation during the midcentury years. Although most of this type of material postdates the period under study, one of the

most detailed surveys, by Henry Mayhew, commences in the year of the second cholera epidemic, 1849, and so can provide material for part of the period in question.

While these three sources can contribute only marginally to the study of religious attitudes among the working classes during the middle decades of the century, they can be used to supplement or corroborate evidence from a fourth, and more promising alternative provided by the records of the domestic mission societies of the midcentury years. By using all the available records associated with domestic mission work, the diaries, biographies and mission magazines, it is possible to approach working class religion from three perspectives: missions, missionaries, and "the missionised" themselves. Before exploring perceptions of cholera in this section of society, these three aspects of the missionary movement will be examined to set the period of the epidemics within a broader context of working class religion.

#### The Domestic Mission Movement

The history of the domestic mission movement documents an important aspect of society's response to irreligion among the lower classes. The nature of the organisations which developed, their aims and the tactics pursued to achieve them, reflect contemporary perceptions of what was seen as one of the most serious problems of the age, and so is a pertinent aspect of the present enquiry. The missionaries themselves provide another important perspective on the subject. The fact that they were predominantly of working class background gave them a distinctive insight into those they worked amongst, and also provides, in the missionaries' own attitudes, another example of religious and moral ideas prevalent outside the middle classes. Finally, missionary accounts of working class life at this time were the most detailed and closely observed available and, because domestic missionaries operated in sections of society inaccessible to other agencies, covered a wider spectrum. Each of these strands will be used to throw light upon the religious life and ideas of the lower classes which were object of their endeavours.

Domestic or home missions were but one part of a wider response to the perceived growth of irreligion amongst the working classes in the early nineteenth

century. Long before the religious census of 1851 provided statistical evidence about the nation's religious practice, there had been growing awareness of the extent to which large sections of the population had apparently eschewed any form of public worship. The early decades of the century had thus seen the development of a variety of evangelising activities designed to reach out and reclaim the unchurched multitudes. These included tract distributors, scripture readers and lay visitors, as well as the earliest of the home mission societies, the first of which seems to have been started by the Baptists in 1797. Initially many of these initiatives had taken the form of committed individuals working with particular clergymen or attached to specific chapels, visiting homes and workplaces within a circumscribed area. But while the parish remained an appropriate unit for these activities in traditional rural areas, it became evident that in the expanding conurbations and semi-rural industrial settlements, where resident incumbents were insufficient or non-existent, a different approach was needed. This led to the development of supra-parochial visiting organisations such as the Anglican District Visiting Society, and the corresponding dissenting body, the Christian Instruction Society, which were able to raise money nationally and organise their activities over a wider area though still on a denominational basis.

However, the extent of the problem to be overcome in the largest conurbations clearly required a more radical solution and led to the formation in 1824 of the first city mission, the interdenominational Metropolitan City Mission. As Lewis has shown, there was far greater cooperation between the denominations than has usually been recognised, and individual Anglicans and nonconformists worked together in a variety of evangelising activities from an early date [2]. That fierce interdenominational rivalries were not allowed to impede these endeavours is a measure of the depth of contemporary concern with the problem of working class irreligion. Although the existence of the Metropolitan City Mission allowed a more efficient use of resources, it did not attract much publicity and never became a dominant force in this field. The potential of this means of

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[2] D M Lewis, Lighten Their Darkness (Westport 1986) documents the extent of interdenominational evangelising in London between 1826-60.

evangelism was not to be fully exploited until David Nasmith embarked on his crusade to spread his particular model of the interdenominational mission throughout the country. The first of these was inaugurated in Glasgow in 1826; between this year and his death in 1839, Nasmith was responsible for setting up forty-five town missions in Great Britain as well as some in America.

The most well-documented of these are the London City Mission (LCM), launched in unpromising circumstances in 1835, followed in 1837 by the Country Town and Village Association, which spread this system of mission work via a country-wide network. The success of these missions, if measured only in terms of their ability to expand and attract funds and volunteers, must at least in part be attributed to Nasmith's determination to exclude sectarian strife and concentrate on a simple spiritual aim. The interdenominational structure was ensured by maintaining equal numbers of Anglican and dissenting clergy on the controlling committees; this not only enhanced the reputation of the organisation, but ensured a continuing supply of both funds and helpers. Missionaries were instructed to ignore differences between Calvinists and Arminians, and Church and chapel, and to concentrate on learning the Bible [3]. "Religious improvement" of the "untutored peasantry" and the "poor and working populations" of the industrial cities was the explicit aim [4], and without doubt the overriding motive of all these domestic missionary groups was religious evangelism. Although this purely religious impulse was often to founder against the material barriers of poverty and cultural deprivation, the primary motive remained religious salvation rather than some blend of social/moral welfare. However, it emerges from missionary reports that the explicit prohibition of material, as opposed to spiritual, aid was not over-rigidly enforced. Some individuals clearly used their own discretion over whether, and how much, to alleviate physical distress.

The use of paid, rather than volunteer lay workers and a preference for "converted men of the humble classes" [5] were important elements of

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[3] Quarterly Record (January 1849) p. 221.

[4] Home Mission Magazine (1832); Quarterly Record (1849).

[5] The phrase used by the LCM missionary John Weylland in These Fifty Years, (1884).

Nasmith's system. Nasmith was fully aware of the formidable barriers to communication and trust which existed between even the best-intentioned clergyman or middle-class volunteer and the severely deprived and ill-educated classes targeted. These barriers he was determined to overcome by using men and women who spoke the same language and shared a similar background. This was frequently mentioned in mission magazines; under advice or instructions to agents are found homely recommendations such as "do not ape ministers" and "do not be above your station in life - the City Mission employs pious working men not gentlemen" [6]. Although "working class" agents predominated, later London City Mission (LCM) records show a wide range of occupational backgrounds including former clergymen. Of 214 LCM missionaries, only 48 were categorised by Lewis as "lower-middle class or above" [7], and it seems probable that many of these had risen from more humble origins through their religious vocation. A typical example, who became a personal acquaintance of Lord Ashley, was described in an appeal for funds to support dependents after his death in a train accident. The missionary, a Mr Miller, had spent his early years in a Workhouse, the only education received being at Sunday School, but had risen to become a London missionary and Secretary to a Ragged School [8]. However, for all candidates it is clear that the ability to communicate with the lower classes, including the criminal underclass, was an important qualification. Agents were selected from respondents to advertisements and also, in later years, promoted from amongst the ranks of successfully converted "sinners". They were trained and examined by a committee of clergymen before commencing a probationary period in their allotted area. One of the conditions of employment was an undertaking to reside close to their "parish" in order to become a part of that community and be constantly at hand when needed; the diaries contain many examples of midnight calls for help at sickbeds, or to intervene in cases of domestic violence and drunkenness. The committees recognised that the work entailed much

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[6] Quarterly Record (1850).

[7] Lewis, Lighten their Darkness, Appendix D.

[8] Lord Ashley's appeal for funds for Miller's dependents, in LCM Magazine 12 (1847) p 157.

responsibility and loneliness for people unaccustomed to social isolation and provided each missionary with a local superintendent, either a clergymen or prominent citizen, to give guidance and support.

The missionary's duties were clearly laid down, including the hours to be spent on each of the regular activities, such as house-to-house and hospital visiting, scripture reading or holding meetings. The importance accorded to the daily recording of all their activities is evident from the detailed instructions specifying how the journals were to be kept. The journals not only supplied the raw data for the compilation of national statistics of success rates in endeavours such as restoring fallen women and reforming drunkards but also contained an account of every encounter of the missionary's daily round, in which they were encouraged to record verbatim all important conversations. Each missionary's journal was regularly inspected and discussed by the local committee. Abbreviated reports and extracts from the journals appeared in the monthly mission magazines and played an important part in raising public interest in missionary work, thereby attracting more funds and volunteers.

From what is known of the selection and standardised training of agents, from the highly-organised work schedule, and above all, from the minutely specified requirements of their journal-keeping, it is clear that mission records are potentially an unrivalled source for exploring the religious life of an otherwise undocumented section of the population. However, since so few of the original diaries have survived, this material has to be approached largely through the extracts, reports and précis published in the more plentiful mission magazines. The scrupulous detail of their daily journals is of course lost from the magazine extracts which survive, but these do reflect a full range of successes and failures experienced, and so provide an opportunity to assess attitudes in a variety of encounters. While the use of published extracts undoubtedly introduces a potential source of bias, surviving diaries and biographies can be used to corroborate the published reports, and extensive contemporary comment on the missions allows further assessment of the reliability of the magazine material. Evidence on this aspect will be introduced later.

The domestic mission and magazine material used in this study consists of the

Liverpool City Mission Annual Reports 1830-54, The Town and Country Mission Record (also known as Country Towns Mission Record and Quarterly Record) 1849-53, The Home Mission Magazine 1832, The General Baptist Home Missionary Register 1831, and the London City Mission Magazine 1839-55.

Despite exhaustive enquiries of City and County archivists throughout the country, the only original journals located were those from Birmingham Town Mission and Carrs Lane. Although not available for most of the years under study, these were included in order to widen the perspective upon missionary work and corroborate findings from the other sources. Autobiographies and biographies used included the LCM missionaries R W Vanderkiste, John Weylland among others.

What can be learnt from these records about the religious consciousness of working class people at this time? Before focusing on the aspect central to this study, perceptions of the role of divine providence in the cholera epidemics, it is appropriate to explore the wider theme which emerged as the dominant concern of the missionaries themselves. This was the extent of ignorance and indifference regarding religion which prevailed amongst the poorest classes. This pessimistic view of the prevailing spiritual state of the poor was widespread and consistent throughout the mission material and is clearly of central significance in any assessment of change. From 1832 through to 1854, frequent and heartfelt reference is made to the absence of religious life in the population targeted, of which the following are a typical sample: "The dense masses of our atheistic and much degraded as well as miserable population" and "the almost universal indifference to religion...manifested in neglect of public worship". "The ignorance of even the first principles of Christianity which prevails amongst multitudes...leads us to pause before we pronounce this a Christian country" and "Myriads of our labouring population are really as ignorant of basic tenets of Christianity as were heathen Saxons at St Augustine's landing" [9].

Were these bleak assessments of the situation after several decades of intense evangelical activity realistic, or was there a tendency to exaggerate the extent of

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[9] Liverpool City Mission: Annual Report (1832), Magazine (1853); Quarterly Record (1849, 1853).



the problem in mission magazines destined for a wider public and potential sources of financial support? If impressions of irreligion had been based solely on church or chapel attendance, as one of the above examples suggests, they would indeed be unreliable, but this was an improbable source of error with experienced missionaries. It was already understood amongst middle class observers that many factors apart from religious motivation affected participation in public worship, including social and practical difficulties about which missionaries would have been particularly knowledgeable and sympathetic. Moreover, several agents' observations demonstrate an awareness that church attendance could be an ambiguous indicator, or even give an over-favourable impression of religious belief, as the following show; "mere non-attendance at public worship gives a very inadequate idea of the real spiritual condition of the poor...many *attenders* are ignorant of the basic tenets of Christianity" [10]; "even those attending divine worship, if they cannot read or write, can understand but little of the matter" [11].

Poor communication between missionaries and those they visited might also have led to inaccurate estimates of prevailing irreligion. A similar socio-economic background was no guarantee of an easy relationship between missionaries and those they sought to convert. The reports show that there were often formidable linguistic and cultural barriers to communication. Educational and cultural deprivation must have left many of the poorest without appropriate language for the expression and comprehension of religious ideas, making it difficult for even the most diligent visitor to elicit underlying religious feelings where such existed. Inarticulate religious feelings could have remained undetected.

On the other hand, where inadequate language hindered communication, this could lead to underestimation rather than overestimation of the prevalence of irreligion. Vanderkiste described how he demonstrated to a probationer that recognition and superficially appropriate use of words central to Christianity could easily conceal a total ignorance of their meaning. His junior colleague's exposition

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[10] Quarterly Record (1849) p.151.

[11] Vanderkiste, Notes and Narratives p.89.

on man's fallen nature, salvation and atonement, was shown to have been unintelligible to a bed-ridden chimney-sweep, in spite of the latter's apparently appropriate responses. Vanderkiste's subsequent searching questions, such as "Do you know who Jesus Christ was?" and "what is a sinner?" then revealed that the rudiments of Christian doctrine were entirely absent [12]. However, the main implication of this incident was that more experienced missionaries would not have been misled on the basis of language alone, a view that Vanderkiste reiterated later:

few persons except experienced Metropolitan missionaries and chaplains of jails can be at all aware of the condition of mind of such persons as respects the reception of religious instruction. Sermons in ordinary language are incomprehensible to them - destitute of any habit of thought upon religious subjects [13]

But the missionary who commented that "religious teaching is almost as strange to many as if I had attempted to instruct in a foreign tongue" [14] was probably referring to something beyond mere linguistic ambiguities. There was in fact a deep cultural gulf to be traversed before the message of evangelism could be comprehended, a process in which the preconceptions of the missionary no less than those he wished to convert could hamper communication. Robson has shown how a strict Calvinist perspective blinkered certain Birmingham missionaries, who failed to recognize and build upon the groundwork of an existing less orthodox Christianity. Methodist missionaries with a less rigid theology working amongst the same population were able to reap the benefit of their failure [15]. So although the absence of basic concepts of Christianity was the most commonly encountered challenge to evangelism, over-rigidly held beliefs in the evangelisers could also present a barrier.

The concept of "religious ignorance" frequently used by the missionaries remains open to misinterpretation by later observers. Could missionaries have

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[12] Vanderkiste, Notes and Narratives p.36-8.

[13] Vanderkiste, Notes and Narratives p.89.

[14] LCM Magazine (October 1848).

[15] G Robson, "The failure of success: working class evangelists in early Victorian Birmingham", Studies in Church History 15 (1978) p.381-391.

labelled as "heathen" those merely ignorant of a particular set of doctrines? The examples quoted by Robson show this occurred in certain circumstances, though Birmingham was apparently particularly unreceptive to evangelical religion [16]. Some of the detailed instructions to missionaries contained formidable lists of doctrines to be promulgated, many of which would have been difficult to explain to uneducated people. One such list included: the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the depravity of man, the necessity of divine influence and salvation through atonement, and added that the last was "completely unknown to most visited" [17]. The actual journals however show that agents were usually able to tailor their message to the exigencies of the situation and attempted to instil only what they regarded as the bare minimum to achieve salvation. In essence this required the sinner to acknowledge his sinfulness and accept that only faith in the power of Christ's atonement could redeem him and secure his passage to heaven. Working as they often were among people whose ideas of Christ and heaven were at best somewhat vague, the missionaries clearly had to resort to a simplified exegesis and to rely on eliciting an emotional response of pity and gratitude for the suffering of the saviour. There was however no fudging of the issue; salvation was clearly defined, and missionaries recorded their judgements on the status of those visited as "saved", "hopeful" or "doubtful cases" or "unredeemed". It is possible that their category of "unredeemed" contained a proportion of mildly religious people who had failed to pass the theological test applied, including those described more recently as adherents of "diffusive" or "common" Christianity [18]. So where missionary estimates of the extent of "heathenism" were based purely on this measure of success or failure of their evangelistic endeavours, they would have tended to an overly pessimistic view.

Do these impressionistic accounts of the extent of working class irreligion and indifference, make it possible to trace any development or change in the spiritual condition of the poor during this period? The frequency of the type of comments

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[16] Robson, "The failure of success", (1978).

[17] Quarterly Record (January 1849).

[18] See R Towler and A Chamberlain, "Common Religion", Sociological Yearbook of Religion 6 (1973) p.1-28.

quoted above gives no indication that missionaries noticed any clear trend until rather later in the century, when comments on improved standards of behaviour in previously notorious parts of London began to appear. Although missionaries frequently produced statistics on numbers visited and whether "reclaimed, hopeful or unregenerate", it is difficult to draw conclusions about changes over time. Very rarely is it possible to compare a single missionary's results from one year to the next, and there is no indication of the size of the background population from which his sample is drawn. In fact the only indication that missionaries were conscious of any temporal element in the pattern of irreligion comes from several comments about the difference between the age groups. Older people, without the benefit of Sunday or charity schools in their youth before the turn of the century, were found more ignorant and hence more hopeless cases for conversion by missionaries during the 1840s and 1850s than the two succeeding generations. The illiteracy rate was much higher among the old, who were said to lack even the limited aspirations of their children's generation. Vanderkist quotes a seventy-year-old man who claimed that he had never before had a thought of God and claims this was true of multitudes of this cohort [19]. Although the young people of the midcentury were more likely to have undergone some rudimentary education which certainly would have included religious instruction, the testimony of a sixteen-year old coster-lad in 1852 shows that this did not necessarily lead to much depth of religious understanding:

I never heard about Christianity; but if a cove was to fetch me a lick of the head, I'd give it him again...No I never heard about this here creation you speaks about. In coorse God almighty made the world, and the poor bricklayers labourers built the houses arterwards...I have heard a little about our Saviou [*sic*], they seem to say he were a goodish kind of man; but if he says as how a cove's to forgive a feller as hits you, I should say he knowed nothing about it [20]

This examination of the missionary movement has vindicated the use of this source to investigate the religion of the working classes, while revealing its limitations as

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[19] Vanderkiste, Notes and Narratives p 89.

[20] H Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor in Selections edited by J L Bradley, (Oxford 1965) p.17.

a means of tracing patterns of change.

### Domestic Missionaries and Cholera

Against the general background of religious apathy and ignorance described above, cholera might be expected to have elicited a very different response, amongst both the missionaries and the missionized, from that manifested by the religiously-active middle classes. How did missionaries represent the epidemic to working class victims of cholera, and how did this differ from interpretations in mission magazines? And how did missionaries respond to cholera sermons delivered by clergymen without the direct sickbed experience of the missionaries themselves? One difference between missionary magazines and most other religious periodicals which is immediately apparent is the very limited comment on cholera in the former compared with newspapers and religious periodicals of the middle classes. This can only be an impressionistic assessment since it is not possible to compare such varied publications quantitatively. As we have seen, evangelical publications gave the subject particularly wide coverage, and it might have been expected that evangelists in the field would react similarly, especially in view of the fact that missionaries were active in the poorest areas where the epidemics struck hardest, and that much of their work took place at the bedsides of the sick and dying. This negative finding clearly requires an explanation.

Regional variation in severity of epidemics would have affected the amount of comment on cholera in mission magazines, and in the case of Birmingham, this was certainly a factor. Birmingham was one of the few large cities to escape epidemic cholera, and this is reflected in an almost complete silence on the subject in surviving Birmingham mission journals. However, since several of the magazines surveyed were national publications, the subject could have been given greater prominence if editors had wished to publicise the more dramatic news from afflicted regions.

Another explanation lies in the physical nature of the disease. From the first missionaries had recognised that cholera was a special case in terms of its potential for sickbed conversions: "the most awful feature of cholera, the shortness of respite it allows" and "the body in too much pain to listen to anything about the

soul" are typical comments by missionaries dealing with cholera victims [21].

The Reverend Lowder who ran St George's mission in London Docks later painted a vivid picture of the difficulties of achieving spiritual ends at cholera deathbeds:

the suddenness of the attack, the awful rapidity with which it spread, the speedy issue of each seizure, requiring immediate attention both for spiritual and physical relief, continually baffled our most earnest endeavours...We were impressed with the great truth that all was in God's hands, that we were but instruments to be used as He might choose, that our spiritual ministrations were of no avail without His blessing. It seemed as if all had to be done in a moment. For the soul it was required that the very first moments of illness should be seized and improved in fulfilling the whole work of the priest, exhortation, prayer, self-examination, confession, absolution, comfort, preparation for the last struggle, must be now or never: collapse so soon followed the first symptoms that there was not a moment to lose. And yet for the body these moments were also most precious, medical attention, prevention, nursing were demanded at the very moment when we should have been glad to have kept the patient perfectly quiet for preparation of his soul for death [22]

It is clear that cholera was perceived as providing limited scope for evangelism, and missionaries might have decided there would be little to gain from publishing material which might give the impression that their efforts during cholera epidemics were ineffective.

A more important factor perhaps lay in the missionaries' own perceptions of the disease process. Long familiarity with extreme poverty and unwholesome living conditions, and with the endemic diseases which these spawned, would have the effect of conditioning missionaries to view the new disease with less alarm. They were already keenly aware of the impossibility of attending to spiritual needs in the physically hopeless circumstances that prevailed in many areas, without the added affliction of cholera. Thomas Finegan, a Birmingham agent, confessed "I cannot make return visits to some because their distress is so severe in temporal as well as spiritual matters" [23]. And a Liverpool missionary reported in 1847, before the onset of the second epidemic, that "in no former year has poverty

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[21] Home Mission Magazine (1832); LCM Magazine (1848).

[22] Rev C F Lowder, Ten Years in St George's Mission (1867).

[23] The journal of Thomas Finegan, an Irish-speaking missionary in Birmingham, is one of the few to have survived.

(been) so great an obstacle...not one in ten of women visited have a sound constitution" [24]. However virulent, cholera could only minimally worsen the state of affairs. Where disease and distress were normal conditions of life, cholera would seem less remarkable to both the victims of disease and to the missionaries, than to middle class observers in more prosperous areas, and so would not seem to merit special comment.

Even so, there were a few missionaries who believed the epidemic could create suitable conditions for evangelism among the survivors if not the victims. A Newcastle agent reported seeing crowds of working men in the streets "so moved they were unable to follow their employment" and observed:

the mood and spiritual tone of feeling among the people generally during the epidemic...unquestionably its effects produced a serious religious concern in the minds of many [25]

and an LCM missionary commented that although

cases of usefulness will necessarily rather be future than present...two classes of person benefited from the disease, those who recovered and the relations of victims who were both inclined to receive religious instruction to an unusual degree at least for a period [26]

The number of such comments in mission magazines is small however, and there is no doubt that if the poor had reacted in a more pious way to cholera it would have received greater publicity.

Whether or not the reporting of cholera in the magazines truly reflects missionary interest in the subject, there is no doubt regarding the impact it had upon the working lives of missionaries in the towns affected. In each of the epidemics there are references to the large numbers of cholera victims visited. In many areas domestic missionaries were the only visitors the dying received; the Quarterly Record estimated that 50% of the cholera deathbeds in Newcastle were unattended except by a missionary [27]. According the LCM, other agencies such as District Visiting Society and the Christian Instruction Society did not

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[24] Liverpool City Mission Annual Report 1847.

[25] Country Towns Mission Record (September 1853).

[26] LCM Magazine (October 1848).

[27] Quarterly Record (January 1859).

venture forth during the epidemics. Vanderkiste recalled a ten day period of day and night calls in his London district during the 1849 epidemic before he was forced to retire to his own sickbed [28]. John Weylland, another London missionary, estimated that in the 1853 outbreak, 5900 cholera victims were visited, of which 2000 died; for a large proportion of these, the missionary was the sole visitor [29]. The Liverpool mission agents also made themselves available for twenty-four hours a day during the 1849 epidemic, but of the 718 deaths attended by one agent, 550 of which were due to cholera, only 32 were regarded as "saved" [30]. A few years later another Liverpool agent reported a similar experience. He attended forty-two sick beds in the 1854 epidemic, and of the sixteen deaths, only two were recorded as "hopeful" in the sense of possible salvation [31].

The greatest concern of the missionaries seemed to be that thousands were dying "without the ordinary opportunity for instruction, meditation and prayer" necessary for salvation [32]. Certainly the numbers dying during the height of an epidemic were far too great for the small number of missionaries available to attend each death. Moreover, missionaries were pessimistic about the outcome even for those they did manage to reach in time. While the result of deathbed conversion could not be known "this side of eternity" the estimate of one agent of "probable cases" of successful conversion was three in twenty [33], and another claimed that only two out of twenty-three were "satisfactory deaths" in his district [34]. Such low success rates were partly a reflection of the "profligate" nature of many of the victims - there were frequent references to the "many unrepentant deaths of sinners" from cholera [35], but it was also a function of the disease itself. As documented earlier, cholera was unlike other fatal conditions with which missionaries were familiar in that symptoms were so acute and

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[28] Vanderkiste, Notes and Narratives p.89.

[29] John Weylland, These Fifty Years, 1884.

[30] Liverpool City Mission Annual Report 1850.

[31] Liverpool City Mission Annual Report 1855.

[32] Quarterly Record (January 1850).

[33] Quarterly Record (January 1850).

[34] Quarterly Record (January 1850).

[35] LCM Magazine (1848).



deterioration so rapid, that opportunity for deathbed conversion was severely restricted.

On the basis of such close involvement of missionaries with the epidemic, what does the mission material tell us about attitudes towards cholera of both missionaries and working classes victims? Did their experience of this exotic and fatal disease tend to reinforce ideas of supernatural involvement or did their active role make missionaries see the disease primarily in material terms? In fact remarkably few of the reports about cholera bear a religious interpretation, and there is little evidence that such a view was offered to, or held by, individual cholera victims. The few examples of a religious interpretation in the magazines were mostly editorial comments rather than direct statements of missionaries' views. For example, the editor of the Quarterly Record echoed the rather bland formal phrase widely used in public statements, in expressing "the hope the chastisement has produced some of the blessed effects for which it was designed by an all-wise and gracious God" [36]. An article on "Cholera and its effects as connected with the London City Mission" explored the outcome in more detail:

the cholera will undoubtedly not have answered the purpose of Almighty God...if it departs and leaves as its trace in every bad district of London the improved sewer, drain etc...but no increased diligence to make clean the inside of the sepulchre [37]

The writer clearly believed physical improvements alone were a negligible gain if unaccompanied by spiritual advancement. In the same article the author questioned whether:

looking beyond second causes...and regarding the disease as sent from God in the way of chastisement for our offences, it naturally leads to the inquiry whether or not the peculiar neglect of God so common among the working classes may not have been connected with the especial singling out of these cases of judgment

The judgemental nature of this comment is unusual in the context of a mission magazine. The force of the message is somewhat reduced by the subsequent observation that the middle- and upper-classes, who were not conspicuously

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[36] Quarterly Record (January 1850).

[37] LCM Magazine (October 1849).

punished in the epidemic, were equally guilty of neglect, in their case of their duty to instruct and help the poor. These religious interpretations of cholera are balanced by references within the same article to entirely secular aspects of the disease. There was criticism of the Union for taking inadequate health precautions before the second epidemic, in spite of warnings from the LCM, and an account of the LCM questionnaire used by all missionaries in order to establish facts and figures about contagion. Thus the religious perspective is moderated by more practical and scientific considerations.

The only two examples of religious interpretations of cholera which are clearly the views of an agent in the field come from Newcastle, from the 1849 and 1853 epidemics respectively. The two epidemics were close enough in time to make it possible that both comments originated from the same individual. In 1853 the agent urged the anxious crowd gathered to watch the constant funeral processions to regard "these warnings as the voice of the Almighty telling them to prepare to meet their God". In the 1849 report a confrontation with an infidel "Barkerite" was described, in which the agent was challenged to explain why God would allow the innocent to suffer along with the guilty in an epidemic [38]. His reply was that we could not hope to understand God's reasons because God is not a man - cholera appears to us an affliction but it could be viewed as the action of a surgeon removing part of the body for the good of the whole: "God permits or sends heavy affliction to fall on the few that in the aggregate the great family of man may be roused from lethargy" [39].

With so few examples of religious interpretations of cholera by the agents themselves it is difficult to draw wider conclusions about missionary attitudes. What is clear is that in the many situations when a judgemental or supernatural interpretation could have been made, either at sick beds, addressing meetings or in reports, they do not appear. For instance, commenting on the relation between cholera deaths and sanitation in his London district, Vanderkiste said: "the connection between sanitary evils and cholera is clear...but deaths are not reducible

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[38] "Barkerite" refers to members of the sect formed by Joseph Barker after his expulsion from the Methodist New Connexion, Gateshead, in 1841.

[39] Quarterly Record (January 1850).

to a rule" [40]. In other words, deaths are not explicable in terms of poor sanitation alone. Significantly however, the absence of a satisfactory physical explanation for the pattern of deaths does not result in recourse to divine purpose or judgement instead.

The fact that domestic missionaries were apparently less inclined to perceive cholera in a religious light than other evangelical Christians preaching and writing at this time could imply an underlying difference in theological doctrine between working-class agents and largely middle-class clerics and contributors to periodicals and newspapers. On the other hand, cholera may have elicited a specific and perhaps uncharacteristic response in missionaries simply because of their close involvement with it. Certainly familiarity with the living conditions of the poor provided abundant opportunity to observe how poverty, poor diet and overcrowding were associated with many common diseases, as well as with cholera. The experience of losing colleagues to some of the same diseases would have reinforced the importance of contagion and/or environmental causes of epidemics, at the expense of moralistic or judgemental explanations. Although there is no record of exactly how they conceived the causal mechanisms to act, there are many comments which show their awareness of the link between sanitation, poor housing and disease.

If the lack of emphasis upon divine intervention or judgement in the missionaries' accounts of cholera resulted mainly from the nature of their theological outlook, can we infer that they tended in general toward a more limited conception of providential purpose in the world than their predominantly middle class clerical contemporaries? Was this culturally-based difference reflected also in those to whom they evangelised? The fact that missionaries do not comment on supernatural or moral explanations of cholera being expressed by those they visited presumably indicates that these were not commonly-held views among the lower classes. What the missionaries most frequently criticised even during cholera outbreaks was the "heathen" worldliness of this class. The "temporary impression" made upon them was rapidly forgotten, and "former indifference" rapidly returned

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[40] Vanderkiste, Notes and Narratives.

as cholera subsided:

they seem to live as if both time and eternity were a chance...as if they cared nothing about the future destiny of their soul for the world is their god; the vast majority living altogether unconcerned about their souls and the world which is to come [41]

If this was true during the crisis conditions of a cholera epidemic, can we infer that a world-view largely devoid of a concept of divine purpose or providence was the norm amongst these classes? According to the author of a pamphlet "An address to Protestants of every denomination" which appeared anonymously in 1847, this was far from the case. The pamphlet, which promised "painful disclosures" about the "shocking proceedings" of the LCM, asserted, among its many accusations, that the London poor were imbued with an extreme version of the doctrine of divine providence. This attitude, which bordered on fatalism, had been inculcated, it was claimed, by the LCM missionaries against the true interest of the poor. LCM missionaries were accused of teaching that all affliction is sent by hand of God:

this awful doctrine I have found to abound even among those miserable beings utterly incapable of forming judgment on any other subject...the doctrine which has such influence among the poor [we] must expect to produce the greatest indifference to their own interest and wellbeing...it cripples every moral energy...leads to sloth [and] to attribute their position, be it never so bad, to the appointment of Divine Providence, even their disease, poverty and domestic affliction supposed sent by hand of God. As a result, conceptions of the Divine character are exceedingly low, not a father but an arbitrary tyrant [42].

Other charges against the missionaries followed: the list was long and colourful, and included falsification of their reports, spying on the poor, fraud, misspending of funds and sectarianism. He concluded that "nonconformist principles" had led to a state of anarchy, which could only be put right by Church of England clergymen taking charge of all philanthropic and evangelistic activities currently executed by the LCM. The LCM responded to this attack in an article in the September issue

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[41] LCM Magazine (1849): Quarterly Record (1849).

[42] An Address to Protestants of Every Denomination (1847): Bodleian Theological Pamphlets A-D 47.1417.

of the Magazine [43]. It was revealed that the above pamphlet was but one of several recent attacks on LCM policy and practice. The LCM had been accused of alienating the people from their (Anglican) pastor, favouring Dissent, and, by following a system which prohibited temporal care, forcing their agents to act as "inspectors" or spies against the material interests of the poor. Although the five pamphlets differed in style, four of them seem to have originated from a single source, an aggrieved ex-missionary who had resigned after a year's service with the LCM in expectation of being ordained. The fifth was by a Marylebone Anglican clergyman who resented LCM activities in his parish.

It seems that the aim of the ex-missionary in making these attacks was primarily to discredit interdenominational cooperation, perhaps in order to curry favour with a particular Anglican viewpoint represented locally. While most of the charges levelled are consistent with this primary motive, the criticism of missionaries on doctrinal grounds, as promulgators of extreme providentialism, requires further explanation. The detailed and reasoned response of the LCM to these attacks is not helpful here, since no reference was made to this particular charge. As we have seen, the published mission material provides no evidence that such an outlook was prevalent among the missionised population. Indeed, one of the missionaries' most common regrets about the poor was the absence from their mundane existence of any idea of divine purpose. If there was any factual basis to the charge, one explanation must be that it referred to a pagan form of fatalism, comparable to that described by Obelkovich amongst the rural poor of Lincolnshire, which may also have persisted in urban populations upon whom the evangelical revival had made little impact [44]. Such attitudes may have seemed so remote from Christian providence that they were simply ignored or unrecognised by earnest missionaries. The lurid tone and ferocity of this pamphlet inevitably detract from its overall credibility, and suggest there was an overriding personal motive rather than any objective grounds for the charges made. However, the question of significant survival of pagan "religion" amongst the urban working

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[43] LCM Magazine (September 1847).

[44] J Obelkovich, Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1865 (Oxford 1976), Chapter VI.

class highlights the importance of the distinction between dechristianisation and secularization in investigating religious decline [45].

The criticisms concerning missionaries' methods of gathering and recording information do however raise the question of the reliability of mission reports, and the charge that they acted as "spies" and "informers" on the poor, borders on an issue of concern to more recent critics, that of "social control". The question of mission work fulfilling the role of social control at a time of change and social unrest has been raised by Rack, who suggests this may have occurred in the new socio-economic conditions of the growing conurbations [46]. It is not clear whether this function was envisaged to act at the level of individual agents or at a higher level within the mission organisation. The former possibility seems implausible from what is known of the social origins of the missionaries, and also from their own testimony of vocation to evangelism. It is possible that the local committees which managed groups of missionaries were influenced by such considerations, but their instructions to the agents, which emphasized the purely spiritual nature of the work, proscribing political or material means of helping the poor, do not support such an aim. Not only did these instructions explicitly forbid handing out food or clothing, even in cases of dire need, but they also warned agents against being "carried away by the spirit of the age", by which was meant becoming involved with educational or sanitation improvement schemes [47].

Financially the missions were largely dependent on the gifts of many private subscribers, so it seems unlikely that political influence could be exerted here. Although Rack specifies cities, it seems more probable that fears over loss of social control and declining deference would be an element in rural areas. Often the appointment of a missionary or visitor resulted from a request by a local landowner or clergyman to the Country Towns and Villages Association. Local subscriptions would be raised for the salary, and the Association would provide a

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[45] See for example McLeod, "The de-Christianisation of the working class", Social Compass (1980) p.197-210: E Royle, Modern Britain: a Social History 1750-1985 (1985) p.338-341.

[46] H D Rack, "Domestic visitation: a chapter in early nineteenth-century evangelism", Journal of Ecclesiastical History 24(4) (1973) p.357-76.

[47] Quarterly Record (1850).

suitably-trained person for the post. There is clearly opportunity for motives other than spiritual salvation to operate where the initiative for, and control of, a missionary presence arises from a single influential individual or small group. But until positive evidence emerges to connect the establishment of new missions with rural disturbances, or lack of deference, the explicit motive, of combating ignorance and spiritual benightedness in the neighbourhood, must stand.

Further evidence that they were aware of the danger of being perceived as some form of government agent, a risk they were determined to avoid, is provided by a discussion of the role of London missionaries in the LCM magazine [48]. Here Baptist Noel [49] explicitly warned the LCM against entering into any alliance with government which might lose their agents the trust of the poor. While admitting that the LCM may have had "a pacifying effect" he insisted this had never been their purpose and that "it would be fatal to this society if it were supposed that this was the object", rather than their primary aim of saving souls.

We are therefore left with the paradox that at a time when both the secular and the religious press were debating alternative interpretations of the role of providence in epidemic disease, and clergymen were using their pulpits to call for national and personal humiliation, the missionary magazine reports of those most intimately involved with cholera were reticent in the extreme. There is no way of assessing the impact of cholera sermons upon the missionaries or working class cholera victims, since no reference was made to them in the journals or magazines surveyed. There is no doubt that missionaries were exposed to them however, since regular church attendance was a condition of their employment. The sole reference noted was a critical comment on a Unitarian sermon which the London missionary Vanderkiste forced himself to sit through, the basis of his criticism being the absence during its hour-long duration of more than three references to providence [50].

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[48] LCM Magazine (1847/8).

[49] Baptist Noel, a clergyman who in 1848 left the Church of England to become a Baptist minister, had been closely involved with the LCM since its inception.

[50] Vanderkiste Notes and Narratives p.153.

Of the two aspects of providential doctrine widely discussed in relation to cholera in a variety of other contexts, neither seemed to have been applied by the missionaries to the section of the population most affected. There seems to have been little attempt to impress and convert sinners with the image of an interventionist deity warning or punishing by means of the epidemic, nor to reconcile the poor to their earthly fate by explaining cholera in terms of a theory of general providence. Did missionaries largely ignore the opportunity created by the epidemics because they had insight into the intellectual and spiritual distance to be covered before such concepts would be meaningful? As practical men they focused their efforts on a narrower front but even so were hardly optimistic; the cholera resulted in "very little salutary and permanent effect among the mass of the working classes" [51]. As with typhus, a temporary impression was made, "then they sink back into their former indifference after the danger is passed" reported a London agent [52]. And even of those upon whom an impression had been made, it was said: "I am fully aware that deathbed repentance and sudden conversions require...considerable caution" [53].

The key to understanding the attitude of missionaries is hinted at in the observation that "there is a much more intimate connexion between the sanitary and the moral condition of the metropolis than may be supposed" [54]. In the same spirit is the LCM's recognition in 1853 that no spiritual progress was possible among the poor until their housing and general physical conditions were improved [55]. Similarly, by the 1850s, "individual" visiting acquired a new significance as a means of promoting intellectual and social, rather than purely spiritual, advancement. This is demonstrated in missionaries' involvement in housing schemes such the Marylebone Housing Society, and many education projects, including the Ragged schools. So although the original impetus and early activity had been inspired by the prospect of spiritual salvation alone, by the time

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[51] LCM Magazine (1848).

[52] LCM Magazine (1849).

[53] Quarterly Record (1850).

[54] LCM Magazine (1848).

[55] J Weylland, These Fifty Years (1884) p.117.



of the mid-century cholera epidemics, after several decades of experience in the field, the missionaries' sphere of action had been broadened by a recognition of the interdependence of spiritual, intellectual and physical deprivation. The condition of the poor, exacerbated by the cholera epidemics, could almost be said to have had a secularizing effect upon the missionaries themselves. Their evangelizing mission, which had begun with purely spiritual aims in the 1830s had become, after several decades of close involvement with these problems, more worldly and secular in character, with perhaps inevitable effects upon their own spiritual outlook.

## Chapter 6

### THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

The response of the medical profession to the midcentury cholera epidemics is clearly an essential element in any assessment of change in the ideas relating disease and religion during the nineteenth century. Even though medical theory and treatment of cholera remained barely in advance of lay opinion during the period in question [1], doctors' practical experience of the disease was probably wider and more intimate than that of any other articulate group, and their recorded response was correspondingly extensive. The medical literature on cholera may thus be used to illuminate how educated and relatively scientific minds responded to the challenge of an exotic epidemic which was perceived by many of their contemporaries in religious and moral terms. At the same time, the surviving corpus of medical comment comprises a record of the ideas to which the lay public were exposed by members of a profession well placed to lead and influence public attitudes towards epidemic disease.

Membership of a body which could be described only very loosely as a profession at this time, did not lead to doctors adopting a common set of attitudes towards the complex problems which Asiatic cholera presented during the first three epidemics. In fact, in view of the significant variation in both training and practice which operated during the first half of the century it would be naive to expect any single professional view of cholera to have emerged. It was not until later in the century, after the 1858 Medical Act, that any degree of unity and professional organisation was achieved which could foster a coherent professional viewpoint. During the years in question, which have been identified as the crucial period of change for the profession, the medical profession was in a transitory state, fragmented and insecure. The different factions were mutually suspicious and engaged in constant struggle to improve their own positions, often at the

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[1] It is generally agreed there was no effective cure for cholera in the nineteenth century; professional and lay treatment were much the same and varied little between 1831 and 1866: FB Smith, The People's Health 1830-1910 (1979) p.236.

expense of each other, thus impeding the efforts of more farsighted reformers endeavouring to increase professional autonomy and to enhance the position of doctors in society as a whole [2]. Training and qualifications varied widely, but the diverse roles of qualified practitioners were not clearly defined. Consequently there tended to be considerable overlap in the practice of different groups. This, and the increasingly overcrowded state of the medical market, led to fierce competition for survival within the profession, and an intensification of the rivalry between the growing ranks of qualified doctors and unqualified "quacks".

Divisions within the profession during this period have been variously drawn, including that between the two Royal Colleges on the one hand, and the Society of Apothecaries on the other, and also between hospital specialists and the less privileged generalists without hospital appointments. There was also a metropolitan/provincial divide, and towards the midcentury the emergence of special interest groups. And underlying the different qualifications and practices were marked differences in social and educational background. Peterson has shown significant variation between the Fellows of the two Royal Colleges in such variables as the numbers who attended public or grammar schools, and the possession of medical and other degrees, all demonstrating the higher social/economic standing of physicians relative to surgeons [3]. The relevance of these social and economic divisions within the profession must be considered when interpreting individual responses to the epidemics. The professional problems and controversies which preoccupied doctors during this period must also be assumed to have influenced what individuals said and wrote on medical and more general aspects of cholera. This effect could operate on several levels; subconsciously, professional concerns could influence individual perceptions of the disease, but also on a conscious level, doctors may have used the opportunity of addressing the public on cholera to further particular professional or political

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- [2] Irvine Loudon, Medical Care and the GP 1750-1859 (Oxford, 1986) chapter 10; I Inkster, "Marginal men. Aspects of the social role of the medical community in Sheffield 1790-1850" in J Woodward and D Richards eds, Health Care and Popular Medicine in Nineteenth-Century England (1977).
- [3] M J Peterson, The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London (1978) p.49-60.

interests.

While the general public may have been unaware of details of the internal problems of the medical profession, lay attitudes towards doctors were undoubtedly affected by several important issues which brought doctors into prominence during the early and middle years of the century. The controversy over dissection and the dubious methods resorted to by hospitals to procure cadavers certainly diminished public trust in the profession. This was reflected during the first epidemic in the reluctance of the poor to allow hospitalization of cholera victims and in public demonstrations protesting about public health arrangements [4]. Suspicion of doctors was also shown in the refusal by some radical groups to accept that cholera was anything more than an excuse to find employment for "starving doctors" [5]. In view of the precarious and marginal state of some parts of the medical profession, it is probable that doctors would have been highly sensitive to unfavourable publicity, and would have exploited any opportunity to counteract negative views of their activities. Therefore public statements during the cholera crises have to be assessed in light of this possible secondary motive, the need to disarm criticism and reassure potential patients. In the view of Durey, however, the overall effect of the first epidemic was to lower rather than enhance the status of the medical profession [6].

The need for patronage in many areas of medicine meant that doctors also had to avoid antagonising elite sections of society, both potential patients and those who controlled or influenced selection for public appointments. The case of William Lawrence earlier in the century demonstrated how cautious even eminent and established specialists could be when threatened by religious scandal. It was left to the radical Richard Carlile to defend Lawrence against charges of "propagating opinions detrimental to society" because none of his medical

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[4] R Richardson, Death Dissection and the Destitute (1988) p.223-8.

[5] "Farce Day" marches and placards such as reported by the Morning Chronicle of 17 February 1832 indicate the low esteem in which the profession was held at this time.

[6] M Durey, "Medical elites, the GP and patient power during the cholera epidemic of 1831/2", in Ian Inkster et al eds, Metropolis and Province: Science in British Culture 1780-1850 (1983) p.274.

colleagues would speak for him [7]. It seems however that their reluctance to support him in public was not because they disapproved of his religious/scientific views; a colleague admitted that "infidel opinions were freely uttered by lecturers and supported by students" in the privacy of the medical school [8]. For the less eminent, also, patronage was clearly a formidable factor in lives of doctors at this time in ways which affected expression of religious views. Peterson has pointed out the importance of religious affiliation in developing a private practice, and also in gaining hospital appointments; sectarian opinion on governing boards could be decisive when making appointments to oversubscribed hospital positions [9].

A large body of medical writing on cholera has survived, forming a substantial part of the total corpus of cholera literature. For the most part, the medical contribution is concerned with the practical problems of treatment and prevention, and with theoretical speculation on causal mechanisms. This is hardly surprising, since the bulk of medical writing appeared in the professional periodicals dedicated to raising the standard of scientific debate in the profession. However, a significant number of doctors became involved in public debate and correspondence on the subject outside the professional press. Their lectures, public correspondence and pamphlets, intended for a wider audience, approached the subject of cholera on a broader front which addressed moral and religious aspects of the subject as well as clinical and scientific issues. How far the views expressed in this context can be taken as representative of the profession as a whole is debatable, and as noted above, there was still insufficient cohesion between different branches for a single professional view to emerge. The religious and moral attitudes of doctors who did express views in this area may nonetheless give insight into the beliefs of a wider group of similar educational and social/economic standing who restricted their comment to practical aspects of cholera.

In between the first and second cholera epidemics a separate but related issue became the focus of public and medical attention, namely, sanitary reform, which

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[7] C Wortham Brook, Carlile and the Surgeons (Glasgow 1943) p.26-39.

[8] This was told to Carlile by a London surgeon in 1825 (quoted by F B Smith, The People's Health p.347).

[9] Peterson, The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London (1978) p.109-144.

will be dealt with in the second section of this chapter. The sanitary movement also produced an extensive medical literature and, as with cholera, it documents a response from doctors far broader than the strictly scientific. It therefore provides a valuable means of complementing religious attitudes displayed in the cholera literature and also, since many individuals were involved in both areas, allows a comparison of their views in each. There has been some debate about the contribution of doctors to the field of sanitary reform. Chadwick's attitude to the profession resulted in a marginalising of the role of doctors in sanitary work, but prior to the 1848 Act, individual doctors had for many years been more actively involved in public health reform than the more publicised evangelicals. After Chadwick's forced retirement in 1854, doctors began to receive public appointments in this field [10]. Szreter has also confirmed that the medical profession contributed to the "identifiable hardcore of medical and associated professionals" which, because they were the educated group most exposed to urban conditions, took up an active role within the public health movement [11].

During these decades there were a number of doctors whose interest in religious issues appears to have been particularly strong, directly addressing the subject of religion in publications unrelated to epidemic disease or sanitary reform. Although lacking the focus of cholera and sanitary publications, these works provide yet another approach to assessing the place of providential ideas in medical thought and will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

For the purposes of this study medical opinion has been broadly defined to include the views of all persons medically qualified, by whatever route, and whether or not in active clinical practice. An initial search was made in contemporary registers to identify doctors active during the twenty-four years of this study whose professional interests and geographical base might have led to

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[10] Christopher Lawrence, "Sanitary reform and the medical profession in Victorian England", Proceedings of Fifth International Symposium on Comparative History of Medicine (1980)

[11] S Szreter, "The GRO and the Historians", Social History of Medicine iv(3) (1991) p.401-14.

their publishing on cholera or sanitary reform [12]. Author catalogues at a number of libraries, including the Wellcome Institute, the Royal College of Physicians of London, Royal Society of Medicine, and the Greater London Record Office, and the Bodleian and other Oxford collections were then searched for relevant publications. Where possible, subject catalogues for cholera, religion, and epidemics were also used. While no such survey can claim to be comprehensive, the use of these extensive collections of articles, pamphlets and biographies, allows a wide sampling of the different strands of medical opinion. It soon became clear that the professional periodicals and academic publications, where the greater part of medical contributions on cholera were published, contain only limited material relevant to this investigation of religious thought. The search in these publications was therefore restricted to leading articles and correspondence columns in several of the leading medical journals. A simple quantitative estimate of the interest generated by each of the successive epidemics was made by a count of index entries in The Lancet. This showed a pattern similar to that of The Times, peaking during the second epidemic; the comparatively low number of references during the third epidemic was the most surprising feature. Indexes of medical biographical and autobiographical works from the period were perused for references to the cholera epidemics in order to trace accounts of personal experiences which might reveal relevant opinions. Newspapers provided another source for medical attitudes to cholera, since letters to the editor often indicated the medical qualification of the correspondent even when the subject was discussed in a non-medical context. In addition, the many pamphlets and individually-published lectures on cholera proved one of the most fruitful sources for attitudes of medical men towards epidemic disease and sanitary reform outside the professional literature.

#### Medical Comment on Cholera

This extensive range of medical writing on cholera was examined with a view to elucidating the extent to which providential ideas influenced doctors' perceptions of epidemic disease and especially the prevailing cholera epidemics. Of central

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[12] These included Munk's Roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London; Medical Register (1859); London and Provincial Medical Directory (1848).

interest was the degree to which doctors actively involved in the epidemics shared in the prevailing religious culture which ascribed to divine intervention the most plausible explanation for this particularly mysterious and threatening disease. What sort of attitudes did the profession take regarding the publicising of supernatural explanations in both the religious and secular press? And how did doctors respond to criticism from church and chapel, which frequently belittled and sometimes condemned their activities as misdirected? A notorious example of such criticism was Edward Irving's assertion that a particular "truly pious" layman who had corresponded with him was:

a greater benefactor to the city of London than all the physicians put together [and] has done more to stay the cholera by this act of faith than if he had built a cholera hospital [13]

Although religious references were not uncommon in the medical literature at this time, especially in the introductions and final paragraphs of public lectures and essays, they tended to be of a general and formal nature. Religious comment specifically upon cholera was less frequent and often couched in language which does not convey clearly the extent to which supernatural involvement was regarded as a real possibility. The use by doctors of certain solemn phrases more commonly encountered outside a medical/scientific context may merely reflect a convention considered appropriate when addressing a topic of great public concern, or, on the other hand, may be evidence of deeply held beliefs openly expressed because of the gravity of the occasion. The following extracts from a letter and an article on cholera, for example: "no one can tell what the Great disposer of events may decree for this beautiful island...and what he may avert" [14], and:

the disease which was sent to us as a chastisement might have been purely a chastisement without a single element of instruction...the great truth that cholera, in common with other plagues sent by providence to punish sinful nations...[15]

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[13] Edward Irving, 18 July 1832, in an open air sermon in Clerkenwell.

[14] Letter in Newcastle Courant, December 1831, from Dr Whitelaw Ainslie, 1767-1837, a surgeon in Public Service (East India Company).

[15] William Guy, "Cholera Gossip" Frasers's Magazine 40 (1849). William Guy, 1810-85, Professor of Forensic Medicine and Dean at King's College Hospital London, a founder of the Health of Towns Association, President of Statistical Society of London. He combined Liberal politics, social reform and



are consistent with a view of cholera as a manifestation of divine action purposefully imposed. Moreover, the author of the latter, William Guy, also admitted that "cholera [is] a very mysterious disease...and nobody knows how to cure it". But far from allowing, as did many of his non-medical contemporaries, that this necessarily implied a supernatural causal mechanism, he recognised that "its haunts are the haunts of fever [and] it derives much of its fatal power from unwholesome conditions". Cholera was thus classified with other prevalent ills, such as "fever, small pox and the whole breed of contagious and epidemic disease" whose origin required no explanation beyond the refusal of government "to punish the negligence of its subjects" [16]. It seems that in this case at least, the providential language was more metaphorical than literal, suggesting that images of divine intervention were invoked for greater persuasive effect rather than for their explanatory value. As in the literature promoting sanitary reform, those doctors who felt charged with a mission to stimulate the public conscience chose arresting and solemn images to strengthen their argument. The use of such language however does tell us something about the religious outlook of the writer and his view of the anticipated reader, namely that medical writers found it appropriate to express their ideas in religious language, and that they expected such language to evoke a positive response in those targeted. It is interesting to note the affinity between Guy's style of writing both in the periodical literature and in his books on public health, with the powerful prose of his contemporary, Carlyle.

Even during the third epidemic of 1853/4, some medical commentators apparently endorsed a religious view of cholera which implied divine intervention:

in thus asserting the power of man over the ravages of pestilence, we do not, for one moment, deny that the cholera influence, like everything in Nature, is wielded by the hand of an over-ruling Providence and will only strike where that hand directs. We rather think that we assert that Providence in the

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medical expertise and "blazed the trail of medical statistics with inadequate recognition through the middle of the nineteenth-century" (quoted by Lawrence Goldman in *Social History Medicine* iv(3) 1991, p.423).

[16] *The Evils of England* by a London Physician (William Guy), 1848.

strongest manner, and cling to that Providence as our only hope...[17]

and

the most reasonable explanation offered was indeed the universal belief of Christendom that cholera is the direct visitation of the Almighty [18]

Both of these writers seemed to feel the need to introduce a providential view in a positive if somewhat defensive manner even though it is clear from the context of each extract that they regarded man's responsibility for combating the disease as the more important issue [19].

The nature of Kay-Shuttleworth's vision of providential action in epidemic disease is also somewhat ambiguous. In the public letter to Thomas Chalmers which prefaced his widely read first book, he observed:

you...must have more frequent opportunities than I of observing with regret that many who recognise the constant presence of a presiding Providence, fail in practically acknowledging the perpetual influence of a mighty source of moral causation: and especially that they witness great events rather with the ignorant wonder of the savage than with that enlightened sagacity which seeks with humility and caution to discover their great moral tendencies...such men regard great epochs such as pestilence and famine as isolated facts of history... separated from their inevitable moral consequences... (cholera) affords a beautiful proof of how mercy abounds even in midst of apparent judgement...our own hands sow the seeds of evil and we reap its harvest...in the terrific visitations of these natural ills...accumulated by repeated intellectual and moral errors of man, how grateful is it to watch the constant interference of a preservative Power, whose presence pervades the world [20]

Although he desired greater acknowledgement of the role and purpose of "presiding Providence" in the epidemic, he does not explicitly postulate supernatural causes. The errors of man are clearly the immediate cause even if providence oversees and controls the course of events. The use of the phrase

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[17] Robert Pairman, Surgeon, of Biggar, Asiatic Cholera - Its Nature and How to Deal With It: a Popular Exposition (1856)

[18] F W Richardson, surgeon, letter in Morning Advertiser, 21 October 1853.

[19] Both the above extracts are followed by exhortations to greater individual and public preventive action against cholera.

[20] J P Kay, foreword to The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes (1832). Kay, later Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, 1804-1877, MD Edin (1827) served on the Manchester Board of Health, and as Assistant Poor Law Commissioner.

"constant interference" shows he was not proposing that physical laws have been suspended on this occasion, only that man's negligence has allowed natural laws, which are constantly overseen by providence, to lead to the inevitable result.

By providing notes for the published version of a sermon preached during the third epidemic [21], the prominent sanitarian Dr John Sutherland appears to have lent medical support to a religious interpretation of cholera. However, this cholera sermon conveys a different message from most delivered during the earlier epidemics. While it expounded upon the biblical teaching that "war and pestilence are afflictions proceeding from the hand of God", it also assured the congregation that avoidance is "mainly in your own hands"; so while not explicitly rejecting divine imposition of disease, the emphasis is now upon the divine origin of the natural laws upon which prevention of disease must be based. On these "divinely appointed sanitary laws", Sutherland commented that:

the didactic and authoritative method of teaching succeeded with nomadic desert tribes - the Jewish people escaped pestilence except where it was directly inflicted for a special end, as on the occasion of numbering of the people.. [22]

thus emphasising the importance of human behaviour, even amongst primitive people, in the cause and prevention of epidemics. However it is clear that he accepted that pestilence could also be caused by an act of divine intervention. It seems that like many of his contemporaries, Sutherland's religious view of scripture had not been markedly affected by German biblical criticism. He accepted the historical truth of biblical accounts but sought a different explanation for contemporary examples of apparently similar phenomena. The problem which discrepancies between scriptural events and contemporary experience raised for biblical literalists could be resolved if biblical history was taken to relate only to an earlier epoch, literally the age of miracles, not comparable with nineteenth-century England. This idea was a recurrent theme in the debates about biblical inerrancy during this period.

Divine providence could be assumed to intervene not only in sending

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[21] Rev. Charles Richson, "The Observance of the Sanitary Laws, Divinely appointed", Manchester, 30 March 1854.

[22] John Sutherland, sermon notes 1854.

epidemics, but also in halting or preventing them. Is there evidence that doctors also accepted a role for providence in curing or preventing cholera? Public prayer and national humiliation were widely regarded as effective or at least appropriate responses to cholera during the first two epidemics; were they accepted as such by members of the medical profession? There were a number of references in medical writing to this aspect of providential action, some of which can be dismissed as no more than conventional formalities. When such phrases occur in contexts in which gestures of piety would have been unnecessary or inappropriate, the probability of genuine belief in supernatural control of epidemic disease is clearly greater. For example, Whitelaw Ainslie ended a letter on practical aspects of prevention and treatment by recommending his readers to:

seek support from that mighty power who sends both the hurricane and the calm and who never disappoints those who devoutly ask [23]

As a voluntary addition not demanded by the context, this seems to point to a personal belief in the efficacy of prayer.

When Thomas Allen summarized his experience of the 1832 epidemic in Oxford in Plain Directions for Prevention and Treatment of Cholera [24], he included a list of "preventive means in the power of all" consisting mostly of dietary and sanitary advice. The first item on his list of recommendations was "Godliness - daily prayer to Him in whose hands are the issues of life, death". Since there can have been no obligation to display piety in a medical handbook, the prominence given to religious observance may be taken to reflect a real belief in its worth. While the rationale may be purely instrumentally based on the fact that such advice would tend to produce more sober and dutiful behaviour, and thus improve the chances of people obeying the medical advice on his list, it could also be the expression of Allen's own belief in the real protective power of religious faith. These and other examples of doctors recommending prayer as a preventive or cure for cholera leave the means of divine action unspecified, and so are also consistent with a cosmological model in which prayer is answered by a chain of

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[23] Whitelaw Ainslie, Letter on the Cholera (1832).

[24] Thomas Allen, MRCS 1830, was a surgeon in Oxford, when he published Plain Directions in 1848.

"second causes" rather than direct intervention. Such recommendations of prayer and public piety may have conveyed a rather different meaning to those who believed in a biblically-based, intervening god, as opposed to a more remote deity, the creator but not manipulator of natural laws.

Advocating public prayer could also be little more than an expression of approval of correct behaviour. Certainly Thomas Shapter approved of "that ultimate resort to the Almighty Ruler of all events" and the beneficial effect this had on public orderliness during the 1832 epidemic in Exeter. It is significant that no reference to public prayer was made in his account of the second epidemic, published in 1853 [25]. This may simply reflect the more stable political situation by the end of the decade, in which unruly public behaviour was no longer so prevalent. On the other hand, Shapter may have assumed that in 1849 public order would be maintained without recourse to supernatural sanction, either because he perceived a decline in the persuasive power of religion on public behaviour or because of his confidence in the efficacy of sanitary measures. The latter was certainly a factor, since he explicitly credited the prompt public health response of 1848 with making the later epidemic far less devastating than the first. However there is a suggestion that public prayer was of greater significance to him than merely as a mechanism of social control, since he included in his account of the first epidemic the observation by a local cleric that mortality started to fall the day after a local Special Day of prayer, leaving open the possibility that he too accepted the causal connection perceived by the clergyman.

From the medical literature surveyed it can be seen that it was not uncommon for doctors' perceptions of cholera to encompass a strong religious element, but that clear evidence for their holding providential views involving divine intervention in the epidemics, characteristic of many clerical and evangelical commentators, was not forthcoming. It is interesting, therefore, to find that these more extreme interpretations of divine action did not attract critical attention in

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[25] Thomas Shapter MD, The History of the Cholera in Exeter in 1832 (1849); Sanitary Measures and their Results, a Sequel (1853). He qualified in 1831, becoming physician to the Devon and Exeter hospital, and contributor to medical journals.

medical writing on cholera. In fact, only two instances of explicit denial or criticism of this sort of explanation for epidemic cholera came to light. The first was made in 1832 by Peyton Blakiston, who commenced his medical training very shortly after delivering a sermon in which he considered the question of divine causation of cholera [26]. He did not deny the possibility that epidemics could be sent by God but affirmed:

We have no reasons for believing that the laws of nature are in any way violated in this visitation, or that it has been sent as a judgment for national sin, since it has visited many different nations, taking much of its character from the sanitary state of the places it visits, and the constitution and previous state of health of those whom it attacks. Therefore whilst we pray for its removal, let us exert ourselves diligently to promote the employment of those natural means for arresting its progress [27]

A more hostile rejection of divine action in the field of public health was made by Charles Lord MRCS in 1849, who asserted that more rigorous science was our only weapon against:

charlatanism be it medical or spiritual...no protection against the dangerous doctrine of a special Divine interference in matters of health can otherwise be obtained [28]

The fact that there are so few criticisms along these lines requires some explanation. It is unlikely that many doctors would have welcomed the publicity given to providential interpretations of cholera, especially by 1849 when growing numbers were actively involved in promoting sanitary reform. Indeed, it might be expected that they would have felt obliged to refute the much publicised opinions of clergymen and other public figures which proclaimed the epidemic to be beyond human control; clearly the cause of sanitary reform would be seriously threatened if there was widespread acceptance of providential explanations which minimised the role of medicine and public health measures. Yet the opportunity to demolish what must have seemed counterproductive views seems rarely to have been taken

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[26] Peyton Blakiston of Lymington, MA Cantab, MD Birmingham 1841, undertook medical training after giving up a clerical career for health reasons.

[27] Visitation sermon, Winchester, 1832.

[28] Charles Lord, "Quackeries in Public Health", Journal of Public Health 1849(2). Charles Lord MRCS 1826, LSA 1825, was Poor Law Medical Officer in Hampstead in the 1840s.

either in the professional periodicals or in the special articles published in pamphlet form for the wider public. Even The Lancet, which carried radical and highly critical editorials on many subjects, made only a brief reference to the popular religious response. In a leader devoted to criticism of government inaction it deplored:

culpable neglect of all really practicable preparations. There will be we doubt not hurryings and crowdings to church and chapel: trusting to all sorts of amulets and safeguards: a spasmodic application of whitewash to black walls [29]

Although religious services are denigrated by juxtaposition with magical charms, no explicit criticism of providential explanations of cholera is made.

Public letters and pamphlets might have provided a more suitable forum for correcting popular misapprehensions of the nature of epidemic disease, especially as they were frequently published anonymously. Such publications were a popular medium with the profession, giving individual practitioners including the less eminent, an opportunity to describe their personal clinical experience and expound their views on causation and treatment. Since these commonly included a review and dismissal of rival theories, the absence of any critique of unscientific providential explanations is especially noticeable. If the absence of critical comment cannot be taken for silent support for applying this brand of theology to epidemic disease, an explanation for medical reticence must be sought in the social constraints under which medicine was practised at this time. Their uncertain status meant that doctors, especially in the competitive field of private practice, were obliged to maintain an image of utmost respectability in any public communication; any hint of impropriety regarding religious attitudes would have been an indiscretion that could have blighted a promising medical career.

Although doctors seem to have been reluctant to criticise openly interventionist models of divine action, they were not averse to introducing a contrasting conception of providence into their writing on cholera. In fact the idea of divine superintendence was frequently invoked in the context of epidemic disease but as a more remote control exercised via the physical laws of the

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[29] Lancet editorial July 1848.

universe rather than directly imposed. Providence was seen to work within rather than outside the laws of nature, which it was man's duty to discover and obey. Pestilence, as one of the consequences of disobedience, was thus a living demonstration of the truth of this cosmological model.

The concept of providence more commonly espoused by doctors could therefore account for cholera without the need to introduce the idea of divine intervention, and bestowed upon man himself the central role in both causing and overcoming epidemic disease. For example, in lectures given shortly after the third epidemic, Southwood Smith explicitly denied cholera had been directly imposed upon humanity:

[thus] we see that epidemics are not made by a Divine law the necessary conditions of man's existence upon earth. The great laws of nature, which are God's ordinances in their regular course and appointed operation, do form and give off around us, products that are injurious to us: but He has given senses to perceive them and reason to devise the means of avoiding them, and epidemics arise and spread because we will not regard the one, nor use the other [30]

Only by recognising the need "to elevate the people from the squalor of the middle ages" will society learn to control disease. So it is up to man to live within the system ordained by God.

It is interesting to note the continuing emphasis upon man's dependence upon God in spite of this declared human responsibility. Even in the apparently rational world depicted in the following extracts, man needs God's blessing to succeed. In a pamphlet on the cure and recovery from cholera, advice at a personal level includes:

use all rational means for your apparent safety then pray God to bless them. May He open our eyes to evidence of truth ..if God has ordained rationality, He has also given commonsense to seek and find the remedy [31]

And a medical lecturer at Newcastle in 1850 informed his audience that:

cholera makes no capricious selection of localities wherein to display its

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[30] Southwood Smith, The Common Nature of Epidemics: Two lectures of 1855 reprinted in 1866. After a Calvinist upbringing, Southwood Smith became a Unitarian minister, and qualified in medicine (MD Edinburgh 1816). Active in the Health of Towns Association and the Board of Health 1848-54.

[31] T Alexander, Suggestions for the Cure and Recovery from Cholera (1853).



greatest virulence; the laws which it follows...are as undeviating and more easily to be ascertained than those by which the motions of the earth are regulated...the existence of a great moving power the laws of whose action we may indeed calculate, but of whose essential nature we are ignorant...is one of the many manifestations offered to us by nature that this world is the work not of chance, but of a Creator at once all-powerful and inscrutable  
[32]

There seems to be some contradiction here; at the heart of a rational and orderly universe is a Creator who remains inscrutable, defying rational comprehension. Ambivalence is also displayed regarding the ability of man to control his environment without supernatural aid. This is evident in Robert Pairman's pamphlet on cholera quoted above:

because Providence has ever blessed all efforts hitherto, it will continue to bless them still. So far from denying the doctrine of a Providence, this is only to assert that its ordinary streams flow in the channels of natural law: it is only to assert that obedience here, as in everything else, will prove its own reward, and disobedience bring down deserved wrath. It is only to assert that if the latent seed be the work of God, the fostering influences which blow it into power, are in a great degree the work of man...so surely has Providence granted to feeble man the power of grappling with this formidable foe  
[33]

In this attempt to demonstrate that human and supernatural roles are not mutually exclusive, the author also appears to be defending himself from anticipated criticism of neglecting to pay proper deference to the role of providence, suggesting that the author anticipated a lay readership with decided theological views.

It seems implausible that the Quaker Thomas Hodgkin would have felt obliged to make a gesture of this kind, but a phrase inserted into his plea for more public action to investigate and prevent cholera, served to remind his readers that even in the field of public health he acknowledged that man is ultimately dependent upon divine providence:

although I have pressed...recommendations with a confidence founded on the conviction of their salutary tendency, I do not forget that "if the Lord keep not the city, the watchman waketh but in vain". Yet surely our humble but

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[32] Plague and Cholera, two lectures by Dr G Y Heath, given at Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, 1850.

[33] Robert Pairman, Asiatic Cholera (1856).

consoling reliance on this protection may be strengthened by our endeavours faithfully to discharge our various duties to those around us, and by our diligent performance of whatever the faculties with which we are blessed point out to us as expedient [34]

Some medical writers portrayed cholera merely as the inevitable consequence of noncompliance with natural, but divinely imposed, laws, as in this later comment by Acland:

Communities as well as individuals may violate the sanitary laws which our Creator has imposed on us; and the consequences of the violation of these laws is punishment to the community for its crime [35]

Others, who also identified natural laws with divine will, emphasised in addition to the inevitable physical consequences of ignoring the rules of health, the sinful aspect of disobeying a divine decree; neglect of physical laws has become a moral offence. Sutherland, for example, in his sermon notes denounced "that ungodliness which consists in the practical denial of the Creator's physical laws" but maintained that it is contrary to divine will to expect National Humiliation rather than human diligence to remove the affliction [36].

Here, as in comments by Heath, Southwood Smith and others quoted above there is apparent confidence in man's knowledge of the physical laws determining health and sickness. It was in fact a confidence not warranted by any progress hitherto made towards understanding epidemic cholera. The medical literature reveals that even during the third epidemic there was little consensus upon causal mechanism and most effective treatment, and the miasma versus contagion debate continued to be waged by many unaware of the significance of Snow's findings of 1849. Perhaps this assurance regarding man's mastery of the physical world mirrored a confidence in the reliability of the laws governing the moral universe which define man's relationship to God. Alternatively, there might have been an inverse relationship between the two, a greater assurance in the truth of moral certainties precisely because details of physical laws were not actually established.

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[34] Thomas Hodgkin, Hints Relating to Cholera in London (1832)

[35] Memoir of Cholera in Oxford (1854). Sir Henry Acland 1815-1900,(MD 1848), was physician and Professor of Medicine at Oxford during the Oxford cholera epidemics.

[36] Sutherland, sermon notes, 1854.

Whatever factors determined attitudes in this area, there is no evidence that interest in moral aspects of the epidemics diminished as efforts to establish precise physical causes intensified. This is exemplified in the response of William Farr, who, as Assistant Registrar General, had access to more information about mechanisms of epidemic disease than most of his contemporaries but showed a continuing concern with the moral implications. Although, unlike many in this field, he made no simplistic assumptions about the unity of sanitary and divine laws in epidemic disease, he did not confine himself to strictly scientific analysis of the subject. His introduction to the official report on the 1849 epidemic suggests that a purely statistical analysis left unsatisfied his need for a more comprehensive view of the epidemic, and an explanation in terms of purpose. For Farr, the purpose of epidemics was to avert the disaster of racial degeneration, the threat of which is not perceived unless a population is:

roused by sudden and terrible catastrophes. That angel which it would seem, it has pleased the Almighty Creator and Preserver of Mankind to charge with this dread mission is the Pestilence. Wherever the human race, yielding to ignorance, indolence or accident is in such a situation as to be liable to lose its strength, courage, liberty, wisdom, lofty emotions - the plague, the fever or the cholera comes: not committing havoc perpetually, but turning men to destruction, then suddenly ceasing, that they may consider. As the lost father speaks to the family and the slight epidemic to the city, so the pestilence speaks to nations in order that greater calamities than the untimely death of the population may be averted [37]

He feared that urbanization in low-lying unhealthy areas was leading to a population of "shattered, feeble, febrile and disorganised frames". He did not follow Malthus in seeing the epidemic as a means of controlling surplus population, nor consider the more obvious, to the post-Darwinian mind, possibility that cholera could improve society by diminishing population growth in precisely these poorest most enfeebled sections. Rather he envisaged the mission of cholera to be the preservation of the health of society, by providing the stimulus to:

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[37] William Farr, Report on the Mortality of Cholera 1848-9 (1852) p.xcvii. Farr, 1807-83, the son of a farm labourer was adopted by a Dissenting minister, entered medicine as an apprentice and worked as a medical journalist and historian before entering the GRO. He developed the science of vital statistics, which he used to investigate the environmental causes of disease.

the great sanitary reforms, which will shield the country from pestilence, while they save the lives of thousands, will prevent the degradation of successive generations and promote the amelioration and perfection of the Human Race.

Thus his interest in the cholera epidemic went beyond the practical measures and alternative theories of causation to:

portraying in this epidemic the moral effects which as historians have not failed to perceive, possess the highest interest in the great catastrophes of mortality [38]

The concept of cholera as a divine mission, in the context of an official statistical report, has to be taken as metaphorical, but the impression remains that Farr believed in the reality of the purpose and the moral lesson taught by the epidemic.

The problem of correctly interpreting the language used by many doctors to describe moral aspects of medical issues has already been referred to in the case of William Guy. In another of his articles, Work and Wages, the role of cholera is described in direct and simple language:

if we may be allowed to guess at the design of Providence in sending this pestilence to scourge us, we would say it came as a preacher and missionary of cleanliness... Having thus by this great national sin deserved the peculiar chastisement of a pestilence, as by other sins we have merited other punishments, the cholera has been sent a second time, with authority to convict and punish ...a permanent addition to the diseases which the Almighty keeps in store as ready instruments of punishment for impenitent and rebellious nations...a God-commissioned Health-Inspector, to discover and punish [39]

Whether or not this is literally how the author, an academic and statistically sophisticated doctor, viewed the epidemic, he must have been content to let such an interpretation be understood by readers of his popular article.

Some medical comment focuses on the moral effects of cholera rather than the purpose for which it was sent. In The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes, Shuttleworth argued that "good moral consequences will flow from the introduction of cholera" by increasing public awareness of and sympathy for the poor. He believed this would lead to greater government and charitable action, and eventually to the moral and physical advancement of the lowest

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[38] This and the preceding are from the introduction cited above.

[39] William Guy, "Work and wages", Fraser's Magazine, November 1849.

classes. He also believed that cholera had a more direct role to play in moral elevation of the lower ranks:

those who would rescue them from their condition must depend not alone on elevating them physically but must seek to produce a strong and permanent moral impression. Cholera will assist as it conveys the strongest admonition of the consequences of insobriety, uncleanness, improvidence and idleness [40]

Shapter also recognised the moral effects of the epidemic. Like Kay-Shuttleworth, he saw cholera as the agent of social improvement:

passing by, with reverential acknowledgement, all discussion of the wise purpose of that First Great Cause which rules and governs all existence, the lessons thus taught us, if properly considered and duly attended to cannot fail to confer the greatest advantages upon the social system [41]

### Sanitary Reform

The literature generated by the sanitary reform movement of the 1840s provides an opportunity to compare religious attitudes to cholera with the variety of providential conceptions which were evoked in the wider field of public health and sanitary reform. As mentioned above, it emerged that many individuals contributed to the literature in both these related areas.

Sanitary reform was an issue which aroused powerful emotional responses not only in its supporters, but also in its critics, who were moved by religious, political and economic considerations to oppose the sanitarian movement. For many of its adherents which included a variety of medical and other professionals as well as lay enthusiasts, sanitary reform was almost a religious cause, and developed the character of a crusade. Much of the literature is suffused with a zeal and fervour rivalling that of the religious enthusiasm with which it was sometimes opposed. As we have seen, proponents of sanitary reform during the second cholera epidemic were sometimes criticised in the religious press and in sermons, for emphasising the material, at the expense of the moral and spiritual, causes and cures of the disease. However, a spiritual element is one of most striking features of much of the literature of the sanitary movement. The concept of health frequently acquired

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[40] Kay-Shuttleworth, The Moral and Physical Condition (1832).

[41] Thomas Shapter, The History of the Cholera (1849).

overtones of virtue and even holiness, and the campaign to improve national standards of personal and community health was apparently perceived by many participants as a religious mission.

One aspect of this is seen in the frequent identification of the laws of health with "divine will" or providence. It was commonplace for doctors involved in sanitary reform to refer to "the laws of health" as "divinely appointed" and "imposed by our Creator", and warn against "the sin" of neglecting these laws. Many wrote or lectured on this theme under titles which explicitly expressed this convergence of religious and medical ideals, such as The Connexion of Christianity with Sanitary Improvement and The Religion of Health [42]. The latter was a pamphlet by one of the first female doctors, Elizabeth Blackwell, in which the main message was that in matters of health, "obedience to divine law is the highest wisdom of the human race".

As we have seen, Sutherland was another eminent member of the medical profession who actively encouraged the association of sanitary science with religious belief. His sermon notes already quoted endorsed the sermon's main message that it is nothing less than a religious duty to adhere to the laws of health. He further enhanced the sanctity of sanitary laws by demonstrating that Old Testament dicta which protected a medically unsophisticated people from plague could now be justified in the light of contemporary medical knowledge. Like his view on miracles quoted earlier, this comment could be seen as a contribution to the current debate on the historicity of the Bible, indicating his personal rejection of German "scepticism".

Another theme which recurs throughout the sanitary reform literature is the unity of bodily and spiritual health, the idea that physical wholeness and cleanliness forms an integral part of moral purity. This idea is closely related to the view that religious and social advance is dependent upon improvement in physical health and well-being. The latter position marks a departure from the assumption underlying most contemporary evangelising among the poor and sick,

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[42] Article in Journal of Public Health (1949) by George Robinson MD, and undated pamphlet by Elizabeth Blackwell, respectively.

that physical and economic improvement necessarily follows once the primary aim of spiritual salvation had been achieved. As in the case of Kay-Shuttleworth, the evangelical emphasis upon the primary role of morality could also be held by members of the medical profession.

A belief in the link between moral and physical improvement was widespread among sanitarians, including one of the few to reject explicitly any idea of divine intervention in matters of disease, Charles Lord. Lord campaigned for more government intervention in the field of public health, and in a public letter of 1847 argued for:

legislative action [to] ensure advancement in social, moral and physical existence, which was destined by the mighty Author of man's existence to be attained by man's exertions [43]

In this context he cited approvingly the attitude of a minister of religion in Portugal during the earthquake of 1775, who saw his task as the practical one of feeding the living and burying the dead:

in advocating sanitary measures to place in bold relief the general decrees of nature, and to hold up the practicability of certain grand results through individual exertion, connecting them with the immutability of those Divine laws through which man lives, moves and maintains his existence [44]

So although Lord gave priority to man's responsibility for achieving the necessary improvement in health, both practically, at an individual level, and through government action, he envisaged man working to this end within a providential framework.

Another sanitarian and member of the Health of Towns Association, Hector Gavin, made a similar plea in a lecture delivered the same year; regarding the moral consequences of the insanitary state of the capital he warned of:

the terrible abyss into which physical wretchedness plunges a community...before a man can be a good citizen or Christian, his home must be clean. Therefore it is the duty of everyone to improve sanitary conditions in order that religious feelings can be nurtured...unless physical and social conditions of the people be amended, no great progress can be made in

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[43] Charles Lord, letter to the Mayor of Hampstead, 1847.

[44] Charles Lord, letter 1847.

spreading the doctrines of morality or religion [45]

Furthermore, he reminded his audience, it was their religious duty to improve the lot of those lower down the social scale in order to raise society as a whole.

Southwood Smith also believed that sanitary reform must come first, arguing that the higher aim of moral regeneration could be attained only when people are elevated from squalor. He asserted: "moral purity is incompatible with bodily impurity. Moral degradation is indissolubly united with physical squalor" [46].

This maxim was to be repeated by many in the sanitary movement, notably by Robert Bianchi, one of the early Medical Officers of Health, who quoted it verbatim in his annual report of 1859. His report continued:

It is the home that makes the man: it is the home that educates the family. It is the distinction and curse of barbarism that it is without a home: it is the distinction and blessing of civilisation that it prepares a home in which Christianity may abide [47]

thus uniting the themes of moral and physical advancement with the "domestic ideal". Later in the century, Blakiston continued to labour the same point, that the moral and religious state of society is retarded by social and sanitary degradation [48].

The view that medical and clerical roles are ideally complementary and not in fact dissimilar was another recurrent theme in the sanitary literature, based not only on the shared aims of the two professions, but also upon the idea of the unity of the laws governing morality and health which underlie the work of clergyman and doctor. In a speech to a clerical audience in 1874, Acland reaffirmed his long-held belief in the common origin of social and religious laws. He reiterated his view of the essential part played by the clergy in safeguarding the physical environment of the parish in order to promote the religious and spiritual life of

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[45] Hector Gavin, The Unhealthiness of London, lecture at Literary and Philosophical Society, 1847. Gavin qualified in Edinburgh in 1836, was surgeon to the London Orphans Asylum, lecturer at Charing Cross Hospital, Secretary to Metropolitan Sanitary Association and General Board of Health, and writer on public health.

[46] Southwood Smith, The Common Nature of Epidemics (1855).

[47] Robert Bianchi, Medical Officer of Health Annual Report for St Saviour's, 13 March 1859.

[48] Peyton Blakiston, Modern Society in its Religious and Social Aspects (1877).



parishioners, and the consequent need to train clergy and missionaries in sanitary science [49].

A similar plea had been made earlier by Edwin Lankester, the father of the distinguished zoologist, in an address on public health to the Social Science congress. He argued that only when:

those who instruct weekly in the pulpits and influence the education of the lower class schools are themselves taught the great laws by which the Creator governs the life of the world can we expect the working classes to exercise that judgement and self-control with regard to health [and appreciation] of the sacredness of human life [50]

Elizabeth Blackwell later made a similar recommendation for the introduction of sanitary instruction within theological seminaries, believing the clergy to be still "sadly ignorant" in this field. She also suggested that the study of "hygiene", in the sense of preventive medicine, be promoted within medical schools, to give the field of public health a higher profile within the medical profession [51]. This concern with professional roles of doctors and the clergy clearly influenced medical perceptions in the field of public health and sanitary reform, and it also emerged as a dominant issue in the religious writings of doctors to be examined in the next section.

### Religious Writing

Religious attitudes of doctors during this period can also be explored more directly through the writing of individuals who published more general works on specifically religious issues outside the context of epidemic disease and sanitary reform. Although such works provide a useful complement to the other sources tapped, they raise the question of how much can legitimately be deduced about providential ideas prevalent in the medical profession as a whole from the writing of a few highly motivated individuals, a point discussed in this Chapter's conclusions. It is also pertinent to ask what spurred these doctors to articulate their

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[49] H W Acland, The Influence of Social and Sanitary Conditions on Religion, Church Congress, Brighton, 1874.

[50] Edwin Lankester, Address on Public Health Sheffield 1865 Edwin Lankester 1814-74, MRCS 1837, "man of science", academic and MOH in Westminster, published extensively on physiology and sanitary science.

[51] E Blackwell, The Religion of Health.

religious belief so publicly.

In several cases, where doctors made a point of denying that the traditional association of medicine with atheism still held true, it appears that they published in reaction to the type of accusation traditionally levelled at scientists in certain sections of the religious press. For example, the physician Joseph Brown, in his defence of revealed religion, lamented the "mental malady", by which he meant "Infidelity", at present threatening England's prosperity. By his refutation of the frequently-quoted maxim of Thomas Browne, that of any three physicians, two are atheists [52], as applied to the medical profession in the nineteenth century, it was clear he laid the blame for prevailing irreligion elsewhere [53]. Later in the century Peyton Blakiston remarked:

regarding the connection which is supposed by some to exist between medical studies and material atheism, surely it is time that such a connection were openly repudiated [54]

That such assertions were felt necessary does imply that a view of doctors as insufficiently religious still prevailed in some quarters.

In other cases doctors seem to have been spurred to publish by their awareness of potential conflict between the spheres of religion and medicine, rather than by any external criticism. A strong professional commitment combined with devout religious belief led some to attempt a redefinition of the relationship between the two in order to strengthen the position of each. For some this involved an examination of their professional role, either as individuals or as a professional body, while others were more concerned with the problems arising from the growing body of knowledge created by medical science, and the intellectual challenge which the new ideas presented to traditional understanding of the relationship of body and spirit.

At the level of the work of an individual doctor, it was apparently regarded as feasible to combine professional practice with active evangelism. The physician Thomas Burder, for example, far from seeing any conflict between the spheres of

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[52] Thomas Browne, Religio Medici (1642).

[53] Joseph Brown, A Defence of Revealed Religion (1851).

[54] Peyton Blakiston, Clinical Reminiscences (1878).

religion and medicine, published advice on how doctors could promote religion in their daily work. In his book of advice to junior colleagues, he discussed the practical problems encountered by doctors wishing to promote spiritual health without interfering with the most efficient discharge of medical duties, and recommended ways of making opportunities for "serious remarks on the realities of Eternity". He held that doctors had a greater than normal responsibility here because of the special opportunities for evangelism in the sickroom and for the preparation of the soul at the deathbed. It appears he persisted with his evangelistic endeavours even in the face of discouraging reactions from patients' relatives, to the point of being dismissed from a case [55].

David Brodie was an example of a practising doctor clearly dissatisfied with current practice in both the medical and clerical professions [56]. He was concerned to elevate the role of the individual doctor and furthermore to reform and redefine the function of both professions in order to overcome the "alienation" which he felt divided medicine and religion. In his book of 1859 Brodie confronted the problem which disease presents to the holder of a providential world view by asking:

what place does the Hand of God sustain in its cause, character and cure? Whence cometh this strange phenomenon in a creation once pronounced very good? Prevalent religious ideas do not answer these questions - blind ascription to the great First Cause and positive proscription of all scientific enquiry as to conditions under which it occurs and means of prevention or removal [but] the established dogmata of the medical profession [also] failed to yield any satisfactory reply: [doctors are] not expected to embrace consideration of disease as affecting a moral agent and as sustaining a part in the moral government of the world. Doctors are engrossed by the urgent necessities of their vocation as a secular calling [while] ministers of religion ignore physical aspects as beneath their sphere of operation, taking refuge in an unreasoning appeal to the will of God, as supreme Disposer of all events [57]

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[55] Thomas Burder, Letter From a Senior to a Junior Physician on the Importance of Promoting the Religious Welfare of His Patients (Oxford 1845). Thomas Burder, 1789-1843, MD Edinburgh, the son of Congregational theologian, practised in London.

[56] David Brodie, MD St Andrews 1845, practised in Edinburgh.

[57] David Brodie, The Healing Art the Right Hand of the Church (Edinburgh 1859) p.3-5.

This was the situation he believed had led to the alienation and non co-operation which existed between the professions. His aim in this book was therefore to assimilate religious and secular explanations in the practice of medicine, and:

to ascertain what data are furnished by scripture to warrant the recognition of scientific and practical medicine as an essential element in the Christian system, an indispensable agency in the activity of the church [58]

The answer, he held, is in fact found "fully developed in Scripture; the two prime channels of goodwill to men, medicine and the priesthood, are there found united in Christ". To implement this pattern in contemporary society, modifications in the functioning of the church are necessary. The first step was to have the work of healing recognised as a function of the church. He believed that already the "proverbial antagonism between physician and minister of religion" was becoming less evident, and he instanced the growth of medical missions as a promising example.

Thus Brodie's solution to the problem, the reform of clerical attitudes and training to conform with true scriptural teaching, relied on religious bodies adapting to changing medical practice. At the same time however it assumed the existence of a consistently Christian medical profession seeking this cooperation.

Brodie's book was enthusiastically reviewed in both the medical and the religious press. The Lancet commended his "calm and philosophic spirit" and The Edinburgh Medical Journal praised the "great ingenuity and vast research" displayed. The choice of words may, however, indicate that in spite of this positive response, the subject was regarded as somewhat remote from contemporary concerns. Carlyle opined that "the essential idea is true, that the physician must first of all be a priest" and sought to demonstrate the truth of this dictum in the derivation of the words health and holy from the same root, "heilig".

However, the subject of medical and religious alienation does not appear to have preoccupied the profession as much as other ethical aspects of medical practice. There was clearly widespread interest in reform, but for many this meant the reform of society rather than modifications of professional practices. Persuaded

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[58] Brodie, The Healing Art (1859) p.8.

of the causal relationship between moral degradation and insanitary living conditions, these doctors believed that the medical profession was crucially placed to improve the moral and religious condition of the nation. Underlying this attitude was the assumption, already noted in the case of Brodie, that moral and religious advancement was the end to which all responsible members of society subscribed. Thus, through their responsibility for the physical health of society, the medical profession would become guardians of the spiritual health of the nation. By reforming insanitary and degrading environments, they would create the necessary conditions for society to make moral progress. Doctors thus felt that they were, as a profession, key players in a wider sphere than physical disease. We have seen in the previous section how prevalent were such views amongst doctors involved in sanitary reform.

As a doctor whose career was largely devoted to social reform, Kay-Shuttleworth was prominent in several areas beyond the field of medicine. Early in his medical career as a young hospital doctor he had been impressed by the suffering endured by patients without religious resources to support them:

in hospitals we see the worst features of the characters of men...writhing under the agony of torture with neither philosophy nor religion to point to consolation or hope [59]

This observation did not lead to advocating more evangelism among the irreligious classes but rather to practical research into their living conditions, work which Edwin Chadwick hailed as "the precursor of the most beneficial course of enquiry.. as to the sanitary conditions of the labouring classes [and] a high example of practical Christianity" [60]. From his cooperation with Chadwick over a long period it is clear that Shuttleworth must have shared his views on the primary importance of removing the physical obstacles to moral improvement.

As we have seen, Hector Gavin held similar views, and while he believed it to be the duty of all in the higher classes to work for social advance of the lower, he held this duty to be especially pertinent to the medical profession, in a strong

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[59] Kay-Shuttleworth, letter, 1827, quoted in Frank Smith, The Life and Times of Sir J Kay-Shuttleworth (1923).

[60] Edwin Chadwick, memo ?1841 (quoted in SE Finer The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick (1952) p.152)

position to effect moral progress through their public health recommendations. That William Farr also envisaged a wider role for the profession is evident from a comment in The Report on Cholera of 1849 in which he invoked Bacon's image of doctors as "Ministers of Divine Power and goodness" committed to "the amelioration and perfection of the Human Race" [61].

The need for clergy and medical profession to act together is a theme frequently encountered, as we have seen in the writings of Blackwell, Burder, Brodie and Lankester. Acland also held this view, which he spoke upon at the 1874 congress already mentioned [62]. It was on the same occasion that he also drew attention to a possible source of conflict between the two. He said that while he harboured no wish to discourage or attack religious sentiments, it was necessary to claim freedom of thought for medical scientists. The addition of such a proviso suggests that even in 1874 medical scientists could feel constrained by religious doctrine, a possibility not entertained by early enthusiasts for religious and medical harmony.

An awareness of potential conflict between advancing medical knowledge and traditional Christian tenets was in fact another spur to medical writing in this area. Although, as noted above, Joseph Brown denied that the medical profession of the nineteenth century could still be accused of atheism, he admitted that many doctors were only "natural theologians, not believers in revelation". It was, he suggested, the result of "the scientific mind tending to reject the Bible because rejecting miracles". Brown himself accepted scripture as revelation from God [63], and regarded history as "the record of God's dealings with nations" [64], thus indicating his belief in biblical inerrancy and therefore in an interventionist deity.

Others explicitly denied that there were grounds for conflict between medical science and religion. The eminent physician, Samuel Habershon, for example, asserted that religion was a positive aid to medical study:

True religion will not make you a less earnest or successful student: it will

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[61] William Farr, Report on Cholera, Introduction.

[62] Acland, Influence of Social and Sanitary Conditions (1874).

[63] Joseph Brown, A Defence of Revealed Religion (1851)

[64] Joseph Brown, Memories of the Past and Thoughts on the Present (1863).

impart vigour to your mind to feel in harmony with God as you investigate the most wonderful of His works [65]

The qualification of religion by "true" is perhaps an indication that not all current doctrines would have been equally acceptable in an academic medical establishment.

Some doctors wrote enthusiastically of the complementary nature of science and religion, but viewed science as the "handmaiden" of religion. For example, early in his career, Peyton Blakiston pleaded for science to be introduced into training of all professions, not just medicine, and welcomed the use of science to "exalt our understanding of the Almighty Creator" and religion itself [66]. He discounted the view that science was responsible for leading its adherents away from the God of revelation on the grounds that "great scientists are always religious":

Science is most useful and most honourable when it appears as the handmaiden of religion...building the beautiful edifice of "science truly so called" upon the foundation of religious instruction to elevate intellectually and morally the multitudes [67]

Blakiston's view of the harmony between science and religion at this time is resonant of eighteenth-century attitudes to science, a viewpoint also evident in the early writing of Southwood Smith. In an exposition of the argument from design in The Divine Government, 1816, Southwood Smith equated the Creator with "Divine Providence" and gave a description of his understanding of the nature of providence as follows:

superintendence of minute events is not beneath him [but] seldom does he act directly; seldom is he the immediate cause...He has left the development of his vast plan to secondary causes but these can act only so far and in such a manner as he has appointed...The material world is governed by certain general laws which are never interrupted except on occasions of supreme importance, foreseen and provided for from the beginning [68]

This conception of providence, which includes the possibility of direct intervention

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[65] Samuel Habershon, "Medical Science in its general aspects and study", lecture at Guy's Hospital, 1859.

[66] Peyton Blakiston, The Importance of Physical Science, a lecture, 1837.

[67] Peyton Blakiston, The Diffusion of Scientific Knowledge in Large Towns, a lecture in Birmingham 1837.

[68] Southwood Smith, The Divine Government (1816).

in a generally mechanistic world order, continued to inform his view of events and is consistent with his writing on epidemic disease forty years later.

It is illuminating to compare Blakiston's early views on science and religion with his later post-Darwin writing. By 1878 his enthusiasm for scientific research seems more guarded. While repudiating "the connection which is supposed by some to exist between medical studies and material atheism", he did not attempt to defend all medical science from the charge:

positive assertions arising out of the exercise of the "imagination in science" should be separated by a distinct line from truths which have been deduced from facts elicited by careful and honest research...The study of medicine is supposed to lead to scepticism. But the Bible is no longer regarded as a depository of scientific knowledge. Recently views have been put forward tending not merely to invalidate the truths of revelation but to call in question the very existence of a superintending Providence. As these views have arisen out of certain researches made in animal and vegetable physiology, our studies are proclaimed as leading to material atheism... As a result of evolution some are persuaded that all is the result of chemical and physical forces inherent in matter [with] no necessity for the existence of a superintending Providence, which is therefore [seen as] a myth. What became of the creator of this self-supporting universe? self-extinguished? No rational being could believe this - if not extinguished, then it must still exist, and must be regarded as a personal God, taking an interest in beings he created [69]

In another book written at this time he claimed to accept the truths of both nature and revelation but he clearly could not accept any concept of evolution which distanced man's connection with his Creator in time, and which banished the idea of a *superintending providence* (Blakiston's italics). He therefore attempted once more to disprove evolution by demonstrating a break in continuity (which he assumed to be a necessary feature of evolutionary theory) on the basis that non-living matter cannot be converted into living matter [70]. In spite of his early commitment to science he seems to have been unable to consider a scientific hypothesis which threatened his particular providential world view.

Edwin Lankester was another advocate of science who wrote positively about the harmonious relationship between science and religion. He was regarded as an

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[69] Peyton Blakiston, Clinical Reminiscences (1878)

[70] Blakiston, Modern Society in its Religious and Social Aspects (1877).



early promoter of a more scientific approach to medicine and explicitly declared that there was "no place for divine causes" in medicine, though excluded from this rule "the act of creation itself". His early espousal of "evolution" revealed that his conception of this process required repeated acts of (divine) creation. In a lecture of 1850 he declared that:

The Hand of God is still seen... It is in the formative force by which each individual species grows into its own form that we have to seek the true source of life...but it is precisely here that observations cannot aid us and we feel we are in immediate contact with the Deity, and that His hand alone moulds and immediately sustains the varied forms of life [71]

It is interesting to compare this pre-Darwinian view with Elizabeth Blackwell's later concept of biological determination. An individual's development, she asserted, is determined by the "type, plan, pattern of being" with which he is born:

the subjection to God's law of every individual, which is a limitation, is also a guide - it is the *finger of providence* showing him the road to follow in the wilderness of creation: it is the divine order, according to which each can grow, expand in body and soul [72]

For Lankester, natural science was indeed "the handmaiden of religion", and he believed that an understanding of science by theologians was necessary not least for the purposes of defending religion from attack. It seems that the harmonious relationship between science and religion existed on terms dictated by Lankester's religious beliefs rather than the rigours of science:

Any opposition between the truth of science and scripture ...exists neither in nature nor in revelation but arises from imperfections of the individual mind feeling such contradiction. My own conviction is that there is perfect harmony between the truths of science and revelation [73]

This view was reiterated by his concession, during another public lecture, that "the only answer to the mystery of life was that 'God made it so'" [74].

### Conclusions

This survey of medical writing has concentrated upon a small section of the total medical literature on cholera and sanitary reform, by far the greater proportion of

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[71] Edwin Lankester, New College lecture of 1850.

[72] Elizabeth Blackwell, The Religion of Health.

[73] Edwin Lankester, New College lecture 1850.

[74] Edwin Lankester, lecture to West Midland Field Clubs 1856.

which had no religious or moral content. Since doctors who published religious views may have been atypical in important respects, conclusions about religious views prevalent amongst the medical profession as a whole can only be tentative. Nonetheless, the public expression of these views, and the eminence of many expressing them, would have resulted in a readership beyond their immediate circle, and they may thus have been influential in shaping attitudes among the rank and file of the profession as well as in the public at large.

The published comment reveals a high level of religious consciousness amongst doctors concerned with cholera and sanitary reform. In both areas there seems to be evidence of a strong religious influence upon medical perceptions of health and disease, and the more general religious writing shows that religion continued to be a powerful motivator, for some doctors at least, until much later in the century. Allusions to religious aspects of cholera, both in recommendations for practical measures and in theoretical discussions on aetiology, were mostly implicitly or explicitly determined by a general providential world order. Unsurprisingly, there was little tendency to invoke ideas of direct intervention; doctors' familiarity with other epidemic and endemic diseases provided a model for possible causes and prevention, so that even though they were unable to offer effective treatment, cholera did not appear a unique phenomenon requiring a special response.

Is this expression of a religious view of cholera to be taken at face value? Or should it be seen at a more superficial level, as a reflection of a conventional tendency to adopt appropriate language for a momentous subject such as an epidemic, rather than as an expression of underlying religious ideas? Or even as a conscious, perhaps cynical, assumption of attitudes regarded as necessary or advantageous for material advancement within the context of professional insecurity discussed earlier? Although there is no doubt that such motives existed, it seems unlikely that the last hypothesis was a dominant factor. Personal ambition might have led doctors to show conformity to religious orthodoxy in order to maintain respectability in the eyes of potential patrons and patients, though this seems a less likely explanation of the behaviour in the case of the senior and established figures represented in this sample. Professional, as opposed to purely

personal, ambition may also have been a motive. Doctors might have adopted a more religious stance in their pronouncements upon public health in order to advance the cause of their specialty with the general public. Public health doctors saw that a concerted attack on living conditions was the only real solution to epidemic disease. Linking public health with religion would have enhanced its standing, gained more public interest and support, and added weight to demands for government and charitable intervention.

In the case of cholera, the fact that the profession had no effective treatment or method of control must also have been a significant factor. Whatever the social consequences of explanations couched in purely supernatural terms, doctors would have hesitated to challenge them publicly while they had nothing more convincing to offer as an alternative. Thus to some extent, the widespread assumption of divine involvement may have provided a convenient "alibi" for a profession unable to agree on causal mechanisms or to make any impact on mortality rates. While this may help to explain the absence of critical comment of the more extreme providential interpretations of 1849, it is unlikely to account for all the positive assertions of more moderate religious opinions.

Overall it seems more probable that the providential views of cholera expressed by these doctors reflect a genuine attempt to fit the observed features of the epidemic within their habitual religious viewpoint. The consonance between religious and sanitary conceptions of health which also emerged renders hypotheses of any more complex alternative motivation unnecessary and improbable. The view of providential action revealed by their comments on cholera and sanitary science appears to have been strongly influenced by the natural theology of the earlier part of the century, apparently unaffected by evangelical doctrines and attitudes prevalent during the cholera years. For older members of the profession, whose university education centred on Paley fifty years earlier, this is not surprising [75]. It is however curious that the legacy of Malthus was not more in evidence than in the single example noted in Chapter 3.

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[75] This observation regarding the religious views of doctors is supported by Christopher Lawrence in a recent publication, Medicine in the Making of Modern Britain 1700-1920 (1994) p.50.

According to Young's assessment, Malthusian ideas were as commonplace during the first half of the nineteenth century as Freud's during the twentieth [76], but the outlook of this medical sample seems to owe more to Paley's harmony of nature than the unending struggle implied by Malthus. As we have seen, far from viewing epidemics in terms of population control, Farr saw cholera as an opportunity to improve the health of the nation. He predicted that unhealthiness would be eradicated by the enhanced sanitary conditions cholera instigated, not by elimination of the unfit by epidemic disease.

Although the role of a benign general providence in human affairs appears to have been generally accepted throughout this period, some ambivalence regarding the boundaries between human and supernatural responsibility emerged. As in the debate in the press, several of the medical expositions on providence pursued this aspect, suggesting growing unease with the perspective of an earlier more optimistic age. There was, however, little evidence of awareness of the ethical difficulties raised by providential interpretations of a disease which fell most heavily on those with little control over their lives. The idea of moral purpose, even when providence acts by means of predictable natural laws, remained a central element.

Little evidence emerged to justify the attacks in sermons and the religious press upon "the arrogance of science" in relation to the medical profession. Only one individual, the Poor Law Medical Officer Charles Lord, explicitly contrasted the positive power of science with the "dangerous doctrine of Divine interference in matters of health" [77], suggesting that such criticism may have been primarily directed at non-medical members of the scientific community. But, as Charles Lord claimed, the dominance of providential explanations could actually impede sanitary progress. What Lord was alone in publicly declaring must have been recognised by many doctors who stayed silent. So while the failure to counter such interpretations reflected a degree of professional insecurity, it also indicates the formidable power of religious opinion at this time. Twenty years later than

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[76] R M Young, "Malthus and the Evolutionists", Past and Present 43 (1969) p.109-45.

[77] Charles Lord, "Quackeries in Public Health", (1849).

these events, during the controversy over prayers for the Prince of Wales' recovery, a letter in the Spectator echoed Lord's view, claiming that "popular belief in prayer and providential judgement [had] blocked the path of sanitary reform" [78], while a contemporary issue of the journal of the medical profession, the Lancet, took a more conciliatory line: "while we recognise the hand of Providence we still claim for modern medical science that she has won fresh laurels in the recovery of the Prince" [79]. It is unsurprising to find therefore that professional caution had been an even more powerful factor twenty years earlier, at a time when the profession was in no position to claim any laurels for its progress in combating cholera.

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[78] Spectator VL (1872) p.1012.

[79] Lancet 1 (1872) p.123.

## Chapter 7

### THE CLERGY

The response of midcentury English society to the succession of cholera epidemics has been traced in a range of contemporary publications and through the recorded comments of two groups closely involved with cholera, doctors and domestic missionaries. The other professional group upon whom cholera particularly impinged was the clergy. Some individual clergymen took a personal and active interest in sanitary reform and cholera; a case study of a sample of these clergymen will be the subject of the following section. However, the clergy, as a profession, was inevitably affected by a phenomenon perceived to be of such great national and spiritual significance. On several levels the epidemics clearly required a clerical response, and this was widely forthcoming. As we have seen, clergymen wrote letters and articles on the subject of cholera in both the secular and the religious press, but the principal vehicle for expressing their views and conveying their interpretation of this momentous subject was the sermon delivered from the pulpit.

Sermons constituted an important medium for the dissemination of ideas and communication of information at this time. Their significance and popularity in the spiritual and intellectual life of the Victorians is well established. G.M. Young described them as "the standard vehicle of serious truth" [1] which not only formed the most available reading material at this time, but also provided popular live entertainment. It has been said that "sermon tasting was a duty and delight" enjoyed by many sections of Victorian society during the midcentury years [2]. Sermons reached a wide public by a variety of channels. Firstly, as delivered from the pulpit, sermons communicated directly to large numbers of people every week. The finding of the first religious census which so shocked contemporary observers, that five and a quarter million people were apparently avoidably absent from church services during the last Sunday of March 1851, actually confirms that a

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[1] G M Young, Early Victorian England (1951) vol.ii, p.425.

[2] Horton Davies, Worship and Theology in England (Princeton 1962) vol.4, p.283.

large proportion of the population did attend a service that day. From these census figures we can infer that over seven million people were exposed to sermons at fairly regular intervals at this time [3]. During the cholera epidemics, special services attracted unusually large congregations, so it can be assumed that cholera sermons were heard by even greater numbers, and, moreover, by people in a highly receptive and impressionable state of mind.

Secondly, as published works, sermons comprised a large part of popular reading material. More than a quarter of titles listed in the London Catalogue between 1816-1851 were books of divinity, of which collections of sermons formed a significant proportion [4]. As well as collections in book form, sermons were also published as single pamphlets, which were frequently reprinted and reviewed in religious and other serious periodicals. And as we have seen, they were also extensively reported upon and abstracted in the newspaper press, reaching yet another section of the reading public. Sermons can therefore be assumed to have made a significant contribution to the prevailing climate of opinion in many areas of thought, and especially in one as emotive and dramatic as cholera. Sermons are thus an important source to explore in studying the changing perceptions of providential involvement in epidemic disease.

On one level sermons can provide an explicit statement of a clergyman's theological tenets, and allow generalization to those of his peers and to the doctrines and concerns of his particular church party. On another level they shed light on his individual perception of the prevailing intellectual and social climate. A sermon could be a response to this general climate as well as to his particular congregation's intellectual or social circumstances, which were not necessarily the same. Thus sermons can reflect widely-held orthodoxies and/or the personal views of particular individuals; some clergymen attracted large followings as they became famous, or notorious, for their idiosyncratic views on issues of the day. The existence of such celebrities make it possible to monitor the changing attitudes of individuals who preached during more than one of the midcentury cholera

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[3] K S Inglis, "Patterns of religious worship in 1851", Journal of Ecclesiastical History 11 (1960) p.74-86.

[4] Dodds, The Age of Paradox (1953) p 23.

epidemics.

As well as providing an opportunity to investigate developments in clerical thought, cholera sermons also present an indirect means of exploring lay opinion during the epidemics since they constitute a record of the ideas to which large numbers of ordinary people were exposed, including some the less literate classes beyond the reach of the religious and secular press. In interpreting their impact upon lay opinion, the extent to which sermons functioned to induce conformity to certain theological views, as distinct from being merely a public reiteration of what was already widely accepted, must be taken into consideration.

Although there are clearly strong grounds for incorporating sermon material within this study of religious consciousness, methodological problems limit the usefulness of this source to reveal trends or assess change over a period of time. Sermons have survived from the midcentury period in relatively large numbers, both singly and in collections, but because of the difficulty of estimating what proportion of the total these represent, it is impossible to assess the degree of bias of any sample of sermons drawn from the surviving pool. Assessing the rate of social/intellectual change by comparing individual sermons from different years is extremely problematical without some indication of how typical or otherwise these sermons are.

To some extent this difficulty can be avoided by focusing upon a specific group of sermons which were published within days of their delivery from the pulpit by a particular periodical. Although such sermons clearly cannot be taken to be randomly selected, any sampling bias is limited to the initial selection process, rather than the unassessable effects of later editorial decisions or the accidents of survival. While it may not be possible to establish how representative such a group is of all sermons preached at this time, this approach allows temporal developments in theological and social thought to be traced with greater reliability, albeit across a narrower spectrum of opinion. Findings from such a case-study can be corroborated by surveying other sermons of the period from more heterogeneous collections. Great efforts were made to follow up individual preachers over the twenty-four year period. All subsequent sermons of clergymen who spoke on cholera during the first epidemics were examined, focusing



particularly on later cholera years, but broadening the search if later sermons illuminated any developments in their views on providential involvement in epidemic disease.

The principal sample of sermons used in this study was provided by the Pulpit, a periodical which published a weekly selection of sermons, both verbatim and abstracted, throughout the cholera years. The aim of this publication was defined in the preface to the first issue of 1823. Addressed to "The Friends of Religion" it declared itself:

designed to be the vehicle, not of any particular class of religious opinions, but of such real information and practical instruction as may be acceptable to all who acknowledge one common Redeemer...to comprehend everything expected to promote the interests of religion and virtue [5]

According to the preface, the Pulpit originally aspired to a variety of features, including notices of new theological works, historical and descriptive accounts of churches and chapels, essays, precepts and maxims, memoirs and anecdotes of eminent Christians, but the opening section of each issue, which in time came to dominate its contents, was "a report of sermons delivered in London each week, accompanied by occasional critical remarks". No editor was identified, and apart from the brief preface quoted, there was little editorial comment except for a few replies to specific enquiries at the end of each issue. However, the association of many of the contributors with the Church Missionary Society, and also the absorption into this organ of the Evangelical Pulpit in 1824, indicate the predominance of a strong evangelical interest. Initially the declared intention of the Pulpit was to report upon and reprint sermons delivered in London, but in later volumes sermons from Anglican parish churches and dissenting chapels and halls from all parts of the country were also included. Clergymen were invited to forward their sermons, or sermon outlines for publication, but material was mostly obtained by using reporters who made notes on sermons throughout the capital, a practice which sometimes led to inadequate or inaccurate reporting, as reporters moved from church to church to maximise their cover [6]. Disappointed would-

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[5] The Pulpit, volume 1 (1823).

[6] The Pulpit January 1824.

be contributors had sometimes to be pacified, and the editor was evidently required to justify omitting items from time to time.

An examination of the Pulpit during the relevant years reveals great variation in the number, and to a lesser extent, in the character, of sermons delivered on the subject of cholera during the three epidemics of 1831/2, 1848/9 and 1853/4. As was found in the national newspapers, the second epidemic provoked a more extensive response than either of the other outbreaks, twice as many cholera sermons being published by the Pulpit 1848/9 as in 1831/2 and 1853/4 combined. It is clearly important to establish how much, if at all, this numerical variation resulted from changes related to publishing practice rather than changes in clerical behaviour during the different outbreaks. The anonymity of editorship and absence of editorial sections makes this difficult to assess. However, several features of this publication suggest changing editorial policy would not have been a significant factor. The method of reporting and speed of the publication process did not in fact allow much time for editorial selection; many sermons were printed within a week of their pulpit delivery. A survey of the contents over five decades gives no indication of any significant shifts in style or subject matter over a longer period than that of the present study. With such long term consistency it seems reasonable to postulate some degree of correspondence between the number of cholera sermons published each month in the Pulpit and the number of preachers who chose to preach on the disease.

Other collections and individual sermons from the relevant years, from libraries in London and Oxford, were also surveyed, especially with a view to tracing later sermons of the Pulpit preachers [7]. In terms of tracing individual clergymen these searches met with very limited success. However, the ideas and themes pursued in the cholera sermons located complement the results of the more rigorous Pulpit survey and provide corroboration for some of these findings, although they cannot of course contribute further to the question of the frequency

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[7] These include Dr Williams' Library and the Evangelical Library in London; the Bodleian, Pusey House, Regent's Park, Westminster, Mansfield and Manchester College libraries in Oxford. The Pulpit and Bodleian sermon series used here are listed in Appendices B and C.

of such sermons. Analysis of the Bodleian cholera sermons follows the presentation of the Pulpit findings.

#### Sermons of 1831/2 from the *Pulpit*

The Pulpit published nine cholera sermons during the 1831/2 outbreak, twenty-six during 1848/9 and only four during 1853/4. In content, the sermons of 1831/2 generally lacked the fervour and explicit providentialism which was to characterise those from the later epidemics. During the first epidemic, cholera was widely perceived as a serious and novel threat, but within the same category as other natural disasters. Epidemics were clearly under divine sway, but only as all other terrestrial events, not as a unique example of divine intervention. Thus in one of the earliest sermons to appear on the subject, cholera was presented as an example of the natural and political upheavals of the times which constituted "the predicted signs of the second advent" [8], rather than having a special significance for the nation's welfare.

A belief that the second coming was imminent was not uncommon at this time, expressed by one as orthodox as Thomas Arnold, who accepted cholera as an instance of "the same concurrence of calamities, wars, tumults, pestilences, earthquakes etc, all marking the time of one of God's peculiar seasons of visitation" at this time [9]. The threatened arrival of cholera was thus a warning for all to make ready for their end, rather than a specific signal of God's displeasure. Another sermon from the early months of the first epidemic also viewed cholera as an entirely natural non-judgemental phenomenon; its spiritual significance for this clergyman lay in the opportunity it provided for proper preparation for death, rather than the possible reasons for its infliction. Believers were urged to demonstrate a "peaceful confidence in God", not give way to fear, so that they would be ready to meet their Maker however soon they were called [10].

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[8] Sermon by Thomas Page (Rugby) 12 December 1831.

[9] Thomas Arnold, letter of 25 October 1831 in Rev. F. Blackstone, The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold (1846) p.241.

[10] J Scott, "The True Remedy Against Fear", sermon delivered in Hull, 22 December 1831.

Of the six sermons delivered on the Fast Day of 21 March 1832 reprinted by the Pulpit, only one perpetuated this view of cholera as a manifestation of the eternal uncertainty of life rather than a special visitation. Treating the different forms of fatal disease as morally equivalent, the message conveyed was that "whether we are carried one by one to the judgement seat by a particular disease, or sent there in crowds by a general pestilence", the correct response to either of these eventualities was prayer and preparation for judgement [11]. Thus, although cholera must have appeared at least as novel and alarming in 1832 as in later years, the response portrayed in these early sermons was calmer, perhaps more fatalistic, but, following a tradition which allowed the epidemic to be seen in the context of other natural calamities, it required no new interpretation of purpose or cause.

The concept of national sin in relation to cholera was introduced in a sermon by Baptist Noel, who was to become a frequent contributor to the pages of the Pulpit [12]. The "nation's guilt" was expounded upon at length but within the context of "the eternal wretchedness of man" ever since the Fall rather than that of contemporary society. His demonstration that "the nation is guilty before God" indicated that a punishment more severe than pestilence was deserved, but an explicit causal connection between the present guilt of the nation and the arrival of cholera was not made. The doctrine of providence in relation to the epidemic first became the focus of discussion in the sermons of two bishops on the General Fast Day of 21 March. The Bishop of London, preaching before the Royal family in the Chapel Royal, took this opportunity to review the evidence for the "peculiar operations of Providence in the history of nations". While accepting evidence of this law, in both the physical and the moral worlds, he warned against:

the impropriety of rashly denominating every affliction of providence of a general character as "a judgement of a nation" [furthermore] calamities such as pestilence could hardly be said to be a special visitation of Providence for a nation's sins when they saw the good perish in equal numbers with the wicked [13]

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[11] Sermon by Rev Gray (Bishopsgate, London) 21 March 1832.

[12] Sermon of 21 March 1832.

[13] Charles Blomfield, sermon in the Chapel Royal, 21 March 1832.

He emphasised that the prevailing sins of covetousness and luxury were largely those of the rich, while cholera chiefly punished the poor. Blomfield concluded that even if cholera was not a judgement, it was certainly a lesson to all. Furthermore, the neglect of the Sabbath had deserved, even if it had not called down upon the nation, the wrath of heaven. He therefore saw nothing improper in religious intercession to the throne of mercy.

This cautious approach to providential interpretation was echoed in the sermon of Edward Maltby, Bishop of Chichester, of the same day [14]. While endorsing the general idea of a divine providence, which he believed to be established by both reason and revelation, he too urged caution in associating specific sins with natural calamities. He conceded that:

without pretending to assert...specific interpositions of Providence in every circumstance of life, [he entertained] no doubt that God did frequently visit nations with calamities...to recall them from errors.

He concluded that "from the appearance of a severe disease ..with symptoms hitherto unheard of...that the judgement of God is at present upon us". Here we sense a reluctance on the part of two prominent Anglicans to be too specific in their interpretation of the epidemic, exploring but not wholly endorsing the providential view of cholera which was later to become predominant. It may be significant that both Maltby and Blomfield had shown a tendency to favour laissez-faire solutions to social problems. This approach has been associated with a form of moderate evangelicalism which conceived providence as acting through natural laws rather than direct interventions [15]. In this interpretation, such individuals would tend to favour a view of cholera as the natural consequence of sin rather than a supernatural visitation. However, in the case of Blomfield at least, this view of cholera was to undergo several developments during the course of the three epidemics [16].

Another London Fast Day sermon also revealed uncertainty in interpreting the

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[14] Bishop Edward Maltby, sermon at Westminster Abbey, 21 March 1832.

[15] Boyd Hilton, "The Role of Providence in Evangelical Social Thought", D Beales and G Best, eds, History, Society and the Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick (Cambridge, 1985) p.215-33.

[16] See below Chapter 8.

divine purpose of the epidemic. A Reverend Smith admitted that:

we could have no test of the Lord's intention in his visitation except by the comparison of our lives with the rules of the Gospel...ills with which Providence afflicted us are not to be understood merely as correctives, but also as proofs of our great wickedness [17]

The latter observation did not however lead him to assume the harsher view taken by some later sermons, that because the poor were the hardest hit, they must have been more sinful. He made a plea for more public, as well as private, charity "to raise the condition of the poor", though apparently without making the specific connection between poverty and disease. Although biblical quotations were not lacking in the sermons of the first epidemic, the use of scriptural evidence was rarely as literal and dogmatic as in those preached during later outbreaks. This might have reflected greater confidence in a wider acceptance of biblical authority during the earlier period, but the absence at this time of any other competing authority relevant to the new peril must also have been a relevant factor. The debates over biblical inspiration which so divided the evangelical world during these decades do not seem to have affected clerical opinion so much in the first cholera episode as in the second, when a zealous upholding of scriptural inerrancy was far more pronounced.

The generally cautious tone of the sermons of this episode is not shared by the remaining two examples, which both in message and style resemble the response which was to characterise the sermons seventeen years later. In an open air meeting, a setting which might be expected to provoke a more enthusiastic response, Edward Irving promulgated his view of cholera as "a call for national repentance" [18]. Biblical authority was quoted to explain the meaning of the epidemic, and also to prescribe the correct remedy. Cholera was identified as "God's curse upon a godless people" and, since "there is no protection from this disease save in the name of our God", the appropriate defence lay in the power of

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[17] Sermon by Rev. Smith, Temple Church, London, 21 March 1832.

[18] Edward Irving, the Scottish founder of the "Catholic Apostolic Church" and the Morning Watch, was at this time a popular prophetic preacher in London, though his "speaking with tongues" at Regent Square church was soon to separate him from respectable evangelicalism.

biblical text, namely Psalm 91. The writer of a pious letter sent to Irving was held by him to be "a greater benefactor to the city of London than all the physicians put together [who] has done more to stay the cholera by this act of faith than if he had built a cholera hospital" [19].

An even more explicit and confident exposition on "The duty of reliance on the guidance and protection of God" was a conspicuous precursor of the providential message of later epidemics [20]. This sermon by W B James declared the duty of a true believer under divine chastisement was to acknowledge:

that dependence upon the Providence of God which is a fixed and governing principle in the Christian religion [by which] all events are to be referred to the Will and appointment of the Great Mover of the universe...

But, aware that "a neglect or a distrust if not a denial of God's providence in the preservation and government of nations and of individuals is one of the most crying and alarming sins of the day ", he proceeded to demonstrate the error of this superficial view of the epidemic:

Because the natural eye does not perceive the visible working of the divine economy in the course of events, it directly ascribes all to human means and relies on human aids. But, as if the finger of God were to be revealed as pointing to this great truth of natural and revealed religion, namely, Divine Providence...human providence has been baffled in plans for prevention, human science has equally failed in attempts at a cure.

Cholera was thus a "salutatory (*sic*) lesson" to those who would suppose that nature or chance had been left unchecked or unguided to produce the mighty results:

it would be no less unphilosophical than unchristian to ascribe to any peculiar operation of nature a new and terrible pestilence, which has swept away twenty billion...nor may we suppose that [cholera] is merely permitted, and not appointed and directed by God [21]

The strenuous efforts expended by this clergyman in denouncing any purely secular explanation based on "nature" or "chance" suggest that he was responding to a clearly perceived threat to orthodox belief, though, from the evidence of other Pulpit sermons, it appears to have been a threat which his contemporaries were

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[19] Edward Irving (Clerkenwell), 21 March 1832.

[20] W B James (St Brides, Fleet St), 21 March 1832.

[21] W B James, sermon of 21 March 1832.

either unaware of, or untroubled by, at this time. As we have seen, it was more common at first for cholera to be perceived as threatening but not outside normal experience, providing a warning and opportunity for preparation for death rather than a punishment for contemporary sins. Indeed, the notion of divinely-inflicted punishment was explicitly rejected by one young Anglican clergyman, Peyton Blakiston:

We have no reasons for believing that the laws of nature are in any way violated in this visitation, or that it has been sent as a judgment for national sin, since it has visited many different nations, taking much of its character from the sanitary state of the places it visits, and the constitution and previous state of health of those whom it attacks. Therefore whilst we pray for its removal, let us exert ourselves diligently to promote the employment of those natural means for arresting its progress [22]

### Sermons in 1848/49

The Pulpit's proportion of cholera-related sermons increased threefold in the next epidemic seventeen years later, and formed a more homogeneous group in terms of the theological ideas expressed. An explicit attribution of Divine causation was almost invariably a prominent element, and in more than half of the sermons, alternative more secular explanations were vigorously repudiated:

God is indeed, in the strictest sense, the Author of our afflictions...not random, casual results of general laws operating blindly...but dispensations under Divine guidance and control [23]

we must divest our minds of any infidel doubts or delusions about the source of our trial...the cold and heartless creed of the unbeliever to account national and even individual afflictions as the results of a blind and indiscriminating chance [24]

And in a Thanksgiving sermon at the end of the epidemic it was explained:

while it is neither safe nor scriptural to interpret as direct Divine visitations what are only the immediate and perceived result of human misdoing, it is just as bad philosophy to disown the traces of God's hand in calamities where the efficient causes are more occult and indirect, far-removed and untraceable: such was our late scourge...whose origin is still secret, defied most subtle analysis, it has laughed our generalisations to scorn...you know no

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[22] Peyton Blakiston, Visitation sermon, Winchester 1832.

[23] G S Drew, sermon of 23 September 1849.

[24] Francis Statham, sermon of 16 September 1849.



more about it now than when it first shed a blight on British homes [25] While this preacher admitted that ways may have been found of "tempering the effects", and that any such measures should be implemented, his conclusion was that "carry our investigations of secondary causes as high as we will...we must see God's hand in it...the pestilence is God's servant...we must not cast Him out of its management" [26].

The explanatory power of such concepts as "chance" and "fixed natural laws" was frequently raised for consideration only to be scornfully dismissed on both theoretical and empirical grounds, and the motives of those inclined to this type of explanation brought under suspicion:

let those who trust in chance and necessity ask themselves why it is they resort to these desperate notions. Is it not that conscience tells you that if progress depends on your deserts, then there is no hope of escape? [27]

The providential purpose of the epidemic was much discussed, with punishment for national and individual sins being the predominant theme, though "chastening" and "salvation" were also mentioned; invariably however, there was an attempt to define a more specific role than the more general "preparing for death" of the earlier sermons. Claims such as:

Pestilence is one of the instruments by which God punishes a guilty people [28]

it is sin which has given to death its commission, under the frightful form of malignant cholera, to cut short the thread of mortal existence [29]

tended to outnumber the less punitive interpretations such as:

The storms of God's anger are not let loose upon us for our unmitigated chastisement [but also] sent to remind us of His Sovereign Power, to curb, restrain and lead us to seek Him earnestly [30]

The particular sins which had brought down this judgement were not often specified, the charge of "iniquity" generally made sufficient cause. "The spirit of infidelity", "impiety" and "sabbath-breaking" also appeared, but rarely mentioned

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[25] Daniel Moore, sermon of 11 November 1849.

[26] Daniel Moore, sermon of 11 November 1849.

[27] George Hall, sermon of 15 November 1849.

[28] Henry Hollis, sermon of 16 September 1848.

[29] James Williams, sermon of 3 October 1849.

[30] Francis Statham, sermon of 16 September 1849.

in the Pulpit were the "crimes of filth and laziness" [31] which were by now widely recognised amongst the educated classes as responsible for the proliferation, if not for the genesis, of epidemic disease.

With this sort of judgemental and punitive view of the purpose of cholera there was, not surprisingly, much greater emphasis on the protective power of prayer, resignation and spiritual reform than upon improved sanitation. "Physical improvements to the habitations of the poor" [32] were recommended, but as a means of preventing the "sins of poverty" which predispose to disease, rather than as a recognition of a direct causal link between poor living conditions and vulnerability to cholera. In the minority of sermons which mentioned sanitary measures there was usually a qualified acknowledgement of their role, coupled with a reference to the far greater effectiveness of prayer in overcoming the epidemic. Sanitary precautions were at times actually denigrated:

instead of resolving what we endure...into the operation of some local or physical, secondary and subordinate causes, instead of looking to atmospheric influences as the inducing cause of pestilence, or to sanitary precautions as certain remedy, let us rather ask "shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?" [33]

While the sanitary movement was acknowledged to be "righteous and benevolent" its advocates were warned against trying to improve the bodies of men at the expense of that "better way" which provides care for the soul. The same sermon asked how it was that cholera no longer prevailed in all its violence when there had been no significant change in our physical sanitary conditions, and asserted:

with all our care and precaution it neither comes nor goes but awaits the behest of a Higher Power - daring indeed must be the impiety and senseless the creed which would regard it as growth of men's carelessness...rather than chastisement for sin [34]

The failure of medical science to discover the cause of cholera, and the limited effectiveness of preventive measures were taken to be yet further proof of the providential nature of the epidemic. Since one of the "besetting sins" of the day

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[31] This is the phrase used by Charles Kingsley in his sermon on cholera of 9 September 1849.

[32] Thomas Dale sermon of 23 September 1849.

[33] Francis Statham, sermon of 15 November 1849.

[34] Francis Statham, sermon of 15 November 1849.

was held to be a tendency "to idolise intellect", the "bafflement" of medical science by an inscrutable disease seemed an appropriate chastisement [35].

The Thanksgiving sermons of November 1849 contained many references to the powerlessness of merely human efforts:

The origin is still secret, has defied the most subtle analysis, it has laughed our generalisations to scorn

in vain did we turn to science, caution and skill, tardily we looked away from human aid and lifted our eyes to the hills...

men grew weary of the vague and contradictory theories by which it was attempted to account for [cholera] and felt it necessary to look higher than secondary causes, and for its removal resort to some better expedient than mere human specifics...

science, charity, precautions, all found "not enough" [36]

It was the fall in mortality figures before any medical breakthrough or obvious improvement in sanitary conditions which provided for many of the Pulpit preachers a clear demonstration of the supernatural nature of the epidemic. It was also a convincing demonstration of the power of prayer, pointed out by several in their Thanksgiving sermons, and even earlier in the epidemic by one clergyman, Robert Bickersteth. The latter's conviction that "the chastisement is inflicted by the Almighty and that to Him alone must we look for its removal" had led him to describe his Humiliation Day service as "a public experiment in the efficacy of prayer" [37]. The Thanksgiving sermons of November that year contain frequent examples of such ideas:

It is hardly possible to doubt that the argument has been decided by the direct interposition of Providence...when we had lost all hope of relief from the science and skill of men. The fact is undeniable that the scourge abated as soon as the people turned with earnestness to God [38]

it is a fact never to be forgotten that from the time of this national humiliation, the disease sensibly abated [39]

Another sermon reproved William Farr of the Registrar-General's Office for his

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[35] Francis Statham, sermon of 16 September 1849.

[36] Sermon extracts from Daniel Moore, D F Jarman, R Bickersteth, John Jessop, 15 November 1849.

[37] R Bickersteth sermon of 19 September 1849.

[38] John Jessop, Thanksgiving sermon, November 1849.

[39] R Bickersteth, Thanksgiving sermon, November 1849.

"covert sneer" at the very opportune time chosen by the clergy to pray for mitigation, which this preacher hoped was "incautious rather than irreligious" [40], and continued:

I would ask this or any other denier [*sic*] of the visible finger of God...how is it that the disease no longer prevails in all its violence and fearfulness...our physical conditions having changed so little? [41]

One important issue which emerged in these 1849 sermons was the contentious role of "natural laws" and "second causes" in the infliction of cholera. The great majority, as we have seen, made explicit references to divine involvement, and even where miraculous intervention was not overtly claimed, the frequent use of such images as "God's righteous arm bared", "direct act of Divine retribution", "the hand of God" implied that a mechanism outside normal physical laws was envisaged.

A minority of sermons however, while accepting a providential purpose, explicitly rejected a miraculous means of imposition of the epidemic. In discussing the role of poverty in predisposing to disease, one sermon stated that "God will work by ordinary agencies, and in conformity with established laws" [42]. Another warned against the two contrasting errors of "superstitious resignation" and "saucy self-sufficiency", and established an intermediate position by insisting that cholera is indeed a "visitation of God...but not of that miraculous and incomprehensible character beyond the pale of our reason and grasp" [43].

The Thanksgiving sermon of Baptist Noel attempted to combine a traditional belief in God's total providence with acknowledgement that the operation of natural laws provides sufficient explanation of pestilence:

miraculous interpositions are not necessary to secure the moral government of the world; it is more glorious to govern all by laws than by suspension or direct interposition [44]

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[40] See Chapter 8 for fuller account of how Farr's remark in The Report on Mortality of Cholera of 1849 was interpreted by J Cumming in his sermon of 21 September 1849.

[41] Francis Statham, Thanksgiving sermon, November 1849.

[42] G S Drew, sermon of 9 September 1849.

[43] William Fisher, sermon of 10 October 1849.

[44] Baptist Noel, Thanksgiving sermon, November 1849.

Reluctant to accept that this implied any lessening of His control of events, Baptist Noel proposed that "God prepares the hidden causes of 'natural events' and so makes these natural causes subserve His wise design".

It seems that few clergymen felt it necessary to define the limits and mechanisms involved in the exercise of total providential control of natural afflictions in relation to cholera during the second epidemic.

#### Sermons of 1853/4

The Pulpit published only four sermons on the subject of cholera during the third epidemic of 1853/4, significantly fewer than the twenty six sermons five years earlier. It is unlikely that this reduction resulted from a lessening of the perceived threat, especially in London, where most of the Pulpit sermons were delivered. The summer of 1854 was described by no less qualified an observer than John Snow as "the most terrible outbreak of cholera which ever occurred in this kingdom". Nor was it that the Pulpit had changed its policy regarding publishing sermons from special services of Humiliation and Thanksgiving; such sermons abounded in 1854, but mostly in relation to preparations for war in the Crimea, and the good harvest of 1854. As during the previous epidemic, complaints were made by the clergy about the failure of the government to name an official Day, but no evidence was presented to show that popular demand for such measures was as strong as during the previous outbreak.

In content, the Pulpit sermons of the third epidemic were remarkably similar to those of 1849. They continued to assert the primacy of divine causation, and also to insist on the need for spiritual, rather than sanitary, reform as the most effective remedy. However, the attacks on "chance" and "necessity" as explanations for cholera, which had been so prominent in 1848/9 did not reappear in 1853. It therefore seems possible that in 1849 clergymen had reacted against a particular challenge, perhaps a prominent example of "the shallow philosophy of an infidel press" [45], which posed merely a transitory threat compared with the growing realization by 1854 of the relevance of sanitary conditions to the transmission of disease. The role of these "secondary causes" continued to be

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[45] A phrase used by Daniel Moore in September 1849.

debated, and attention was given to them in each sermon, though in such a way as to diminish their importance:

there may be people still talking of second causes, and we will look on second causes as far as we may; we will endeavour to avert the evil by the use of means which God may give us; but...no cholera nor any other evil can happen to us except by permission of God...doubtless there are second causes...predisposing causes...but I behold in it Him [46]

we leave others to be careless and sceptical...to human device and worldly policy - we follow in reliance on their greater efficacy, the means of prevention appointed by God [47]

Commenting on the official advice regarding the removal of noxious rubbish, the latter's response was "how blind - even when these sanitary measures are carried out, a much more prolific propagator of disease remains behind - sin!"[48].

A further example of this tendency appeared in a sermon at the end of this outbreak:

doubtless second causes are important, but after every deduction and allowance is made, we are compelled to return to the great First Cause, and to acknowledge that this public calamity is indeed the voice of God [49]

It is clearly more significant that second causes and sanitary measures should be disparaged in 1854 than in earlier epidemics. The insistence on the paramount importance of a spiritual response at this stage seems, to a modern reader, almost perverse. The assertion that "there is no fanaticism in believing that our Father hears and answers prayers" [50] has a defiant note, possibly suggesting awareness of increasing marginalization of this position.

The dramatic fall in the number of cholera sermons published by the Pulpit during the third epidemic could be explained in several ways. As discussed earlier, the general style of this periodical leads to an assumption that its contents bore some relationship to the type and frequency of sermons preached each week. Fewer sermons on cholera could mean that clergymen had begun to find the subject less compelling by this time, or assumed this was true of their

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[46] Montague Villiers, sermon of 18 September 1853.

[47] William Curling, sermon of 5 October 1853.

[48] William Curling, sermon of 5 October 1853.

[49] L M Humbert, sermon of 14 September 1854.

[50] William Curling, 5 October 1853.

congregations. After all, only four years separated the third outbreak from the previous one; cholera was now more familiar and increasingly coming to be seen as an endemic disease rather than an exotic visitation as in 1831 and 1848. On the other hand, complacency about so fatal a disease seems unlikely in London, where mortality rates peaked dramatically during 1854 causing widespread alarm in the affected areas. Clergymen may also have abstained from preaching on cholera during the third epidemic because, even if it continued to attract popular attention, it now seemed a less appropriate topic for the pulpit. If cholera was now regarded by society as predominantly a practical problem, whose solution lay in the world of public health and hygiene, its usefulness in the moral and spiritual domain would be correspondingly reduced. As was seen in chapter 3, cholera continued to be newsworthy in the secular press during 1853-4, though at a lower level than previously, mainly as a result of a shift of emphasis by both editors and correspondents towards more secular aspects of the subject. Clergymen may therefore have dropped cholera as a subject for sermons, not because they personally believed it to be of less significance, but because they perceived that it no longer served a useful function for their congregations. Such an effect could be a rather belated reaction to, and recognition of, the sanitary campaigns of the 1840s.

The possibility that providential sermons on cholera were actually delivered as frequently as before, but were no longer selected for publication in the Pulpit during the third epidemic must also be considered. However, in view of the fact that the few published sermons perpetuated the themes that had characterised those of 1849, this seems improbable; if an abundance of similar sermons was still available, it is curious such a limited selection was printed. The alternatives therefore are that fewer clergymen preached on the subject, or that their sermons no longer carried a consistent message acceptable to editorial opinion. In either case it follows that after 1849 the number of public statements from pulpits which endorsed a providential interpretation of cholera was significantly reduced. However, the Pulpit continued during 1853/4 to publish many sermons on providential action in the affairs of the nation, but those on cholera were outnumbered by humiliation and thanksgiving for harvests, the Crimean war and

even rainfall.

#### Other Sermons in 1848/9 and 1853/4

To determine whether this pattern of response in sermons was specific to the preachers of the Pulpit, or whether it characterised the behaviour of the clerical profession as a whole, is problematical in view of the unreliability, already mentioned, of tracing trends over time from individual sermons which happen to have survived. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that the Pulpit findings have wider validity. The results of searches through other collections of sermons showed that greater numbers of cholera sermons survive from 1849 than other cholera years; they also provided further evidence on the character of sermons of those years. This is at least consistent with such sermons being more frequently preached during the second epidemic. One Bodleian collection of eighty-nine sermons delivered during 1848/9 included twenty-seven on cholera. These were distributed fairly evenly throughout the four alphabetically arranged volumes, and in terms of thematic contents had much in common with the Pulpit sermons; there was, however, no overlap in the preachers involved. In similar volumes from 1853/4, the subject of cholera rarely appeared.

Analysis of these cholera sermons from 1848/9 shows that an assertion of cholera's status as a manifestation of divine purpose was one of the most frequent themes. As in the Pulpit sermons, a wide variety of arguments was presented to this end. Analogies were drawn with similar visitations in the Bible, and the authority of scripture invoked to force recognition that cholera was similarly under divine command. Alternative explanations in terms of "chance", "fixed laws" and "necessity" were raised only to be scornfully rejected. Cholera's mysterious nature, and "the failure of science", were presented as God's way of showing the futility of combating divine judgements by natural expedients. Declining mortality after special days of prayer provided further proof for many preachers that spiritual, rather than physical, remedies were required.

The role of providence in the epidemic emerged as a dominant theme, and in some sermons, cholera appeared to be taken as an opportunity to discuss the wider implications of the doctrine of providence. Seen as a "direct visitation by the immediate governance of providence" by some, cholera was also presented as an



instance of "special providence" acting through second (natural) causes; the latter interpretation was usually accompanied by a warning against ignoring the primary cause and meaning of the epidemic. It was also argued that although no scientific analysis of the epidemic was yet possible, the doctrine of particular providence would ensure that the laws which regulate His judgements would never be at variance with laws controlling ordinary affairs. Natural laws were simply expressions of His will, asserted another. "The comfortable truth of the connection between prayer and Providence" was reiterated in many sermons; it was further claimed by one preacher that "the efficacy of prayer" was a law of nature comparable with any of Newton's physical laws; since not all the links in the causal chain were known, so the place of prayer cannot be disproved, he concluded.

There were also many attacks on proponents of contrary interpretations, such as the "scoffing doubters" who maintained that "the Almighty is an unconcerned spectator" in the course of events. "Deist" views on natural causes were strongly criticised: "once allow such a doctrine, once give place to the principle which divorces the Deity from His works, how senseless becomes our worship of Him" [51].

A large proportion of sermons actually made no attempt to prove divine involvement in the epidemic, since that was clearly regarded as self-evident. What the epidemic provided for this group was proof of an interventionist deity with which to confound the "voice of refined infidelity"; "refined infidels" were taken to be those who could accept the existence of a "general providence", but were blind to the working of "particular providence" [52]. The following extract typifies the frequent pleas for a return to a more comprehensive view of the place of providence in the world:

the mad call of modern infidelity which would delude you into the desperate belief that the world...is nothing more than a grand piece of mechanism, which the Almighty Creator having framed with infinite wisdom and love has now left to work on according to certain fixed and unalterable laws with

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[51] Francis Thornburgh, Kennington Lane, 19 April 1849.

[52] Rev Benjamin Street, Grantham, 1849.

which he will not interfere [53]

A tendency to associate cholera with the doctrine of providence thus emerges as a general characteristic of these sermons. The relationship seems to have been perceived or used in contrasting ways. Some made use of the epidemic to vindicate their view of providential action in the world, and demonstrate the truth of Christian doctrine, while others elaborated upon the doctrine of providence in order to confound the "scoffers" and prove that cholera was indeed a divine visitation. The general tone of these 1849 sermons suggests the absence of a national consensus on how to view the epidemic and a determination by these clergymen to project an authoritative orthodox interpretation. Both in their tone and in the ideas and attitudes conveyed, they endorse the findings from the Pulpit survey and suggest the latter sample of sermons has wider validity as a sample of contemporary religious attitudes.

### Conclusions

The pattern of response to the three cholera epidemics which has emerged from the Pulpit sermons, showing the high frequency of providential interpretations of cholera in the second outbreak compared with third, has been corroborated by findings from other sermon collections. Although similar themes reappeared during the sermons of 1853/4, the markedly reduced frequency of such sermons at the later date suggests that clerical attitudes to cholera had undergone significant change between 1849 and 1853/4. Changes in the tone and nature of interpretations of cholera in sermons between the first two epidemics were also evident in the Pulpit series. These changes in preaching behaviour must be examined in the light of wider religious issues affecting clergymen, and so possibly the contents of their sermons, at this time. The question of scriptural inerrancy, discussed earlier in relation to religious periodicals, is clearly also of relevance to contemporary sermons. The debate over "graduated" or "verbal" inspiration of the Bible divided evangelical opinion. In the face of the threat posed by biblical criticism and liberal theology, the conservative wing opted for a more rigid and literal interpretation of scripture. The vehemence of sermons defending a

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[53] Rev L Tuttiett, Devon, 19 September 1849.

biblically-based providential interpretation of cholera has to be seen in the context of this wider threat to the very basis of the Protestant faith, the absolute authority of the Bible. For those who felt themselves to be defending the authority of scripture, cholera presented an apparently irrefutable argument to confound the sceptical. It is therefore significant that such arguments were to a large extent abandoned after so brief an interval of time as separated the second and third epidemics.

Catholic emancipation was another subject of great interest to broad sections of clerical opinion at this time. For clergymen who had strong views on this question, sermons provided an effective platform for influencing public opinion. The growth of anti-Catholicism in the 1830s and 1840s has been attributed to the continuation of "popish demands" after the passing of the 1829 Emancipation Act, demands which led some who had supported the Act in 1820s to change their views [54]. The advent of the second epidemic coincided with this rise in anti-Catholic feeling, and some preachers linked chastisement by cholera with what was popularly supposed to be the threat from Rome; the nation was being punished for what was seen as the failure of government to resist popish demands. This issue was closely linked with specific evangelical beliefs about the need to maintain a "righteous" or "Christian nation" and "national faith" [55]. The many references to official Days of Humiliation and Thanksgiving in the second epidemic, either praise for government action or, more often, criticism of government inaction, have to be seen in the context of evangelical pressure upon the government to bow to populist protestant pressure. The reduced presence of such sermons during the third epidemic, before these wider issues were resolved, is a further indication that more fundamental intellectual change underlay the development of different perceptions of cholera in the early 1850s.

The very strength of the evangelical demand for official humiliation in 1849 lends some credibility to the possibility of an ulterior motive, a charge raised

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[54] Hempton, "Evangelicalism and eschatology" (1980) p.179-194.

[55] Best, "The Evangelicals and the Established Church in early nineteenth century England" (1959) 63-78: Rennie, "Evangelicalism and English Public life" (1962).

during the first epidemic in a Unitarian publication, the Repository. In 1832 the editor of this periodical suggested that the appointment of a fast day was "a political move to win ultra-Evangelical party support. Only cant or superstition would profess to believe that cholera which obeys the fixed laws of physical existence could be averted by such mummery" [56]. A similar attack upon evangelical motives had been made in 1831 in another periodical. Here it was asserted that demand for official fasting had:

originated with certain pretenders to evangelical superiority who by their inveterate opposition to national improvement, have helped to occasion the ignorance and consequent vice which they would now make the ground of national humiliation, and represent as a divine judgement the misery and disease to which their own measures have mainly conducted [57]

That such criticisms were not more in evidence in the highly charged atmosphere of the second epidemic, when demands for national fasting and humiliation became far stronger and more numerous, may be evidence of the growing strength of the orthodox evangelical consensus and its power to stifle debate and ensure conformity [58]].

While the differences between the clerical response to the second and third epidemics reflect a variety of factors, the decline in providential cholera sermons after the second epidemic indicates the impact of social and intellectual developments upon clerical opinion. One indisputable result of this change in clerical behaviour is that the church- and chapel-going public were less exposed to supernatural interpretations of cholera during the third than during the second epidemic, and this in its turn must be assumed to have affected wider public perceptions of epidemic disease. The implications for secularization hypotheses of the pattern of response shown in cholera sermons will be further explored in conjunction with a study of a specific group of clergymen in the following chapter.

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[56] The Repository editorial (1832).

[57] General Baptist Advocate editorial vol.1 (1831).

[58] McLeod, Class and Religion (1974) p.219-29.

## Chapter 8

### CLERICAL SANITARIANS

Analysis of responses to the mid-century cholera epidemics has revealed some similarities in the pattern exhibited in the different sources studied, suggesting that certain trends characterised broader sections of society. From the surveys of sermons and the secular press, it seems that the succeeding epidemics elicited differential reactions, the dominant feature being a heightening of religious perceptions of cholera during the second epidemic. Providential interpretations were both more numerous and more extreme in sermons delivered during the second than either of the other epidemics, and religious perceptions of cholera were more prominent in newspaper editorials and correspondence in 1848/9 than in other cholera years. These findings are surprising for several reasons. First, they go against the general presumption of religious decline during the midcentury period, which should have resulted in a steady fall in the number and intensity of religious responses to succeeding outbreaks over the twenty-three year period. Secondly, the second epidemic occurred at the end of a decade that had seen unprecedented public health activity and highly successful campaigns to raise public awareness of the potential of sanitary prevention of disease.

The peaking of providential interpretations in 1849 is especially puzzling when the role of the clergy is considered. As we have seen from the Pulpit series and other sermons, the clerical profession was clearly responsible for intensifying the religious atmosphere which suffused the subject of cholera during the second epidemic, and yet it was also from amongst the clergy that sanitary reform found some of its strongest advocates. Prominent in public debate and correspondence, clergymen were also active at a practical level in their parishes and in the national promotion of sanitary reform. Clergymen were thus opinion-leaders in both of the contrasting perceptions of cholera which dominated the public response to the second epidemic, the sanitarian and the providential. Although both as explanatory models and in their consequences for action, these two views of epidemic disease appear incongruent, if not incompatible, to the modern mind, yet they seem to have flourished together within the clerical profession during the mid-century

years.

The most obvious explanation for this coexistence of apparently incompatible ideas is that they were held by different individuals within disparate sections of the clerical profession. If there was limited social or intellectual overlap between different groups in which opposing ideas were current, individuals would have been protected from having to reconcile inconsistent views. The fact that there was little open debate or mutual criticism between clergymen on this subject would also be more explicable if this were the situation. However, by 1850 it is implausible that this degree of intellectual isolation could have operated, since even the remotest parishes were within reach of newspapers and periodicals, and cholera and public health issues received enormous publicity. It must therefore be accepted that contradictory views of cholera did indeed impinge upon individual clergymen, without apparently leading to much public airing of differences on the subject within the profession. Hostility towards purely secular explanations of cholera, noted in religious periodicals and sermons at this time tended to be directed at "arrogant scientists", or the "infidel press" rather than fellow clerics. Kingsley is a notable exception here; he openly questioned the motives of clergymen who failed to use their position to promote sanitary reform, and he will be considered in more detail later in this chapter.

How can this lack of overt friction between opposing conceptions of epidemic disease within the clerical profession be explained? It could indicate a general reluctance to open a public debate which might widen differences and weaken professional solidarity. In the view of one contemporary clerical observer, William Conybeare, dissension between church parties at this time was not only damaging to the church, but to religious belief itself [1]. In these circumstances, it would hardly be surprising if any controversy over cholera remained publicly unexpressed. Alternatively, it could be that inconsistencies between the two views were less apparent to nineteenth century clergymen than now appears in retrospect. Superficially similar ideas can have very different associations and implications for observers with fundamentally dissimilar outlooks, which the gulf between mid-

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[1] William Conybeare, "Church Parties" (1853) p.97.

nineteenth century and late twentieth century minds may make difficult to appreciate. A further possibility is that the majority of the profession, especially those whose parishes were not threatened by cholera, were merely passively aware of public health issues and never became actively involved. If preventive measures seemed irrelevant to their own situation, there would have been no close intellectual or emotional involvement with sanitarian ideas, and hence no contradiction to resolve. Because of prevailing ideas which associated physical and moral corruption with city life, there might even have been a tendency among non-urban clergymen to distance themselves from what they perceived to be a specifically urban problem.

This last explanation clearly cannot apply to the minority of active sanitarian clergymen who appear to have been a significant and vocal section of the clerical body. Often working in close contact with doctors and public health officers, these clergymen helped to frame and implement public health measures derived from entirely secular conceptions of epidemic disease. Several hypotheses might be suggested to explain how such individuals accommodated the medical/sanitary model of epidemic disease with the providential interpretations so vigorously promulgated from the pulpit and in sections of the press at this time.

One possibility is that by a process of compartmentalization, the need to reconcile mutually exclusive ideas was avoided. Incompatible ideas would have coexisted in separate mental compartments, and if they were always elicited for different purposes and on separate occasions, such as the pulpit on one hand, and the public health board on the other, the problem of integration would not have arisen. This may be what Kingsley had in mind in the first of his explanations for clergymen refusing to promote sanitary reform, which he described as a "specious Manichaeism" separating the secular and spiritual provinces [2]. An alternative response would have been a conscious decision to abandon any pre-existing explanations found to be inconsistent with the new. This could have meant admitting that biblical accounts of pestilence were not to be taken as literally true or relevant to current epidemics. A further possibility would have been to attempt

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[2] Charles Kingsley, Who Causes Pestilence? (1854) Preface.

to synthesise or to syncretise elements of both systems of thought and so to develop a new world-view consonant with the changing intellectual climate.

An interesting parallel to this set of hypotheses was found to exist in the contemporary comment on church disunity mentioned above. After describing the main parties and subgroups into which the Anglican Church had divided by the midcentury, Conybeare attempted to explain the mental processes which underlay this polarization of theological opinion. He suggested that deductions from "fundamental truths" developed differently in different minds, and when at length a "deduced principle" contradicted the basic principle, an individual had three options: to abandon the first principle, to reject the derived "modifying truth" (which he believed to be the resort of extremists), or thirdly, to admit the truth of both, even if the consequences were irreconcilable. While Conybeare was concerned to explain how different theological opinions were arrived at and maintained, his hypotheses could equally well be applied to the interaction of religious and secular systems of thought, the focus of the present study. Although Conybeare did not pursue this last possibility, he suggested that there was a causal connection between religious dissension and the growth of infidelity and atheism across the whole of society at this time. It was his view that "the tide had turned ten to fifteen years ago" (ie c.1840), when the reaction against "the fashionable scepticism of the last century", which had enhanced the religious character of the first part of the nineteenth century, had been reversed, allowing the spread of atheism which followed [3].

For the purposes of the present study, the views of clergymen who were actively involved in the sanitary field provide an appropriate terrain in which to explore the conjunction of religious and sanitary perceptions of cholera and so throw light upon changing religious consciousness at this time. An opportunity is provided by the existence of a voluntary body devoted to sanitary reform with a strong clerical membership, the Metropolitan Sanitary Association. Within this organization, clergymen, presumably self-selected by positive commitment to sanitary reform, were of necessity interacting with non-clerical sanitary reformers

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[3] Conybeare "Church Parties" (1853) p.93-4.



and exposed to a range of secular ideas on the causes and prevention of epidemic disease. The sermons, letters and other writings of MSA clergymen, as well as non-metropolitan clergy known to be active in sanitary reform, will therefore be studied for references to cholera and public health issues.

Founded in 1850, the Metropolitan Sanitary Association (MSA) was a revival of the Health of Towns Association, one of several voluntary bodies which had been influential during the 1840s in changing public attitudes to sanitary issues. The aims of the new association included reform of London's water supply and burials, and extension of the Public Health Act to cover the metropolis, hitherto excluded, in order to reduce zymotic diseases in general [4]. However, meeting in the wake of the second cholera epidemic, it was inevitable that cholera was uppermost in the minds of many who spoke at the opening session in February 1850. The views of these clergy, who had recently experienced, if they had not personally contributed to, the heightened religious atmosphere during the 1849 cholera outbreak, and who were now exposed to the ideas of leading sanitarians, offer an intellectual prism through which the changing perceptions of the role of providence in epidemic disease were diffracted.

Chaired by Charles Blomfield, the Bishop of London, the large founding committee contained a strong clerical element, mostly the incumbents of London parishes as well as several bishops from outside London [5]. The parishes represented included many associated with poor sanitary conditions and high mortality from endemic diseases, but this was clearly not a necessary condition, since clergymen from wealthy and healthier districts were also present. There also appeared to be no simple theological common factor uniting them. The Times manuscript list "Principal clergy of London" provides biographical details of many of these clergymen and shows that theological positions ranged from strong Tractarian to Low Church evangelical [6]. Of the fifteen MSA clergymen who

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[4] The term "zymotic" was used at this time to describe diseases associated with filth, poor drainage, inadequate ventilation, overcrowding, in which organic decomposition or "fermentation" was thought to produce toxic agents.

[5] See Appendix D for full list of members.

[6] This handwritten list (Bod. ms Add c290) was prepared in 1844 "for the private use of Mr Delane" (J T Delane was editor of The Times 1841-77).

featured in The Times list, five were classified as "High" and ten as "High and Dry" or "Moderate"; only two were specially singled out as evangelical, while at least eight were described as strong to moderate Tractarian sympathisers [7]. The purpose of The Times survey was to categorise London clergymen "according to their opinions on the great church question of the day", namely the Oxford movement, and so the biographical details recorded mostly relate to Tractarian tendencies. However, personal characteristics, degree of influence enjoyed and parish activities are also noted, and will be referred to in individual cases.

The report of the first public meeting of the MSA includes two items which demonstrate an awareness of the different implications of the sanitary, as opposed to the religious, view of cholera. The public health doctor, Charles Lord, whose trenchant and radical views were encountered in the last chapter, expressed confidence in the preventability of epidemic disease and claimed that it was:

humiliating to medical practitioners to spend their lives attempting to cure again and again those diseases which return...diseases which were not inflicted by Providence but which arose from man's ignorance and neglect. Medical men alone were the class of man who, by studying the laws of nature which regulate health and disease, could best carry into practice measures of prevention [8]

The other reference appeared in the MSA petition to Parliament, presumably a collective view of the whole committee. It stated:

among impediments to the removal of causes of such disorders [zymotic] which has been more or less prevalent in all ages, that the visitations of pestilence or epidemics are always the direct infliction of Divine Providence; that they were therefore beyond human control and exempted from operation of those ordinary precautions for prevention or removal...Nevertheless it is a fact...that while epidemic diseases are those over which curative medicine has least control, they are specially distinguished as being amenable to efficient measures of prevention. It is clearly therefore a religious duty as well as a wise act of social policy to adopt every available precaution. Prevention is the province and privilege of the medical philosopher alone...the moral and social advantages which would result would greatly aid the sacred mission of the clergy [9]

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[7] While precise meanings of such terms depend on context and user, it may be helpful to note Conybeare's categorisation of Tractarian and "High and Dry" as, respectively, "extreme" and "stagnant" forms of the High Anglican party.

[8] MSA First Report (1850).

[9] MSA Petition to Parliament, published with Report (1850).

These two comments touch upon several issues of relevance to this enquiry. On the central question of divine causation, they are in agreement; while neither explicitly rules out the possibility that past epidemics might have been attributable to divine providence, the implicit presumption of both is that the diseases presently under consideration are not in that class. This is a significant statement in the context of the varied theological opinion present on the MSA committee. The insistence on medical expertise alone in preventing epidemic disease also received emphasis in both statements and is clearly an important element. Does this reflect a staking-out of territory by representatives of the medical profession on the committee, perhaps a response to Chadwick's neglect of medical expertise in favour of lay inspectors in his public health measures? Or was it intended to exclude rivals closer at hand? If the petition was genuinely a collective statement of clerical and medical views, it would be surprising if clergymen were agreeing to leave the field entirely to the "medical philosopher", even if, as was suggested, the clergy would reap the spiritual benefits of successful preventive measures. Was this perhaps intended to discourage a specific group of clergymen, those who took advantage of epidemics to make conversions? An attempt to answer such questions and to test the hypotheses listed above will be made by exploring the views of clerical members of the MSA. Information is not of course equally available for all clergymen, and there is an inevitable bias towards the more famous and active individuals whose work was published and has survived.

One of the most surprising findings to emerge was the presence upon the MSA committee of several clergymen who had delivered sermons with an exclusively providential view of cholera during the second epidemic, some of which explicitly criticised the medical or sanitarian approach. These included Thomas Dale, James Williams, Francis Statham, J W Buckley and John Cumming. Of these, only Thomas Dale appears on The Times list, where he is described as "a well-known Evangelical of great influence in the Low Church party". Sermons of these clergymen have already been quoted in the Pulpit chapter. Further extracts follow:

let us see the signs of our eventful times as...demonstrating God's judgements: instead of looking to secondary and subordinate causes, atmospheric influences, or sanitary precautions as certain remedies [let us]

turn to the Lord [10]

This, above every other scourge, is the immediate and direct act of Divine retribution...it is sin which has given to death its commission, under the frightful form of malignant cholera, to cut short the thread of mortal existence [11]

May we see God's righteous arm bared to chasten us...for sins as a nation and as a church in this present grievous judgement. Our besetting sin to idolise intellect...the fell disease which baffles human skill. Vain is the help of man...Pray for resignation and strength to submit to the mysterious decrees of an all-wise God [12]

In his Thanksgiving sermon of November that year, Francis Statham produced mortality figures to show that second causes alone were insufficient explanations of the epidemic: mortality had declined while physical sanitary conditions remained the same, he claimed. He attacked William Farr for the "covert sneer" which he detected in Farr's remark on the "opportune" timing of special cholera prayers, held when the epidemic was already declining, which he hoped was incautious rather than irreligious. The sanitary movement, he declared, was "righteous and benevolent" but it had to beware of trying to improve bodies at the expense of that "better way" which provides care of souls - or risk losing the cooperation of "servants of God". He concluded that:

we must shun infidel views which shut out the Creator from the work either of saving or destroying His people, which was to deny the whole doctrine of God's provident government of the world [13]

The views of cholera presented in these sermons from the autumn of 1849 are clearly at odds with a sanitarian approach to the cause and treatment of epidemic diseases. Where there is any indication of awareness of the public health model of disease, it seems to have evoked a hostile rather than a favourable response, and there was certainly no leadership from the pulpit to adopt practical measures of prevention. In view of the short time interval between delivering these sermons and joining the MSA, these clergymen appear to exemplify an extreme case of the compartmentalization hypothesis. At least for purposes of pulpit discourse, their

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[10] Thomas Dale, sermon of 23 September 1849.

[11] James Williams, sermon of 3 October 1849.

[12] Francis Statham, sermon of 16 September 1849.

[13] Francis Statham, sermon of 15 November 1849.

providential interpretations of epidemic disease seem to have been unaffected by the influence of sanitarian ideas. To investigate whether closer contact with the sanitary movement resulted in any development in their views requires a record of their response to the third epidemic in 1853/4, and for most of this group, no sermons from this date could be found. However, the fact that the Pulpit did not publish any cholera sermons by these individuals during the third epidemic suggests that none was preached; this periodical tended to favour certain clergymen, and it seems probable that space would have been found for regular contributors if any of them had spoken on cholera. The fact that the few which the Pulpit published by other clergymen during 1853/4 were similar in style and content to the large numbers published in 1849 adds weight to this supposition.

In the case of J W Buckley and John Cumming, however, there is material available over a longer period, allowing developing views of cholera to be exposed. J W Buckley showed little interest in secular explanations in 1849, stressing that it was;

deeply important we should recognise the hand of God in all such visitations...do not let an evil heart of unbelief suggest the thought that what the world calls natural causes alone effects these things. Look clearly beyond natural causes which true philosophy will assure us are but the instruments of God...be sure He willed this visitation...for sin [14]

He appears not to have preached on cholera in 1853/4. However his Humiliation Day sermon for the Crimean war commented on the disease then affecting troops in the Crimea [15]. He repeated his belief that afflictions such as pestilence and war were God's judgements for sin, and from the high mortality from illness, drew the lesson that man should "cultivate a more faithful reliance upon the wisdom and power of God". In view of the publicity surrounding the high death rates and inadequate quartering of troops, the omission of any reference to the duty and possibilities for preventing such diseases is noteworthy, and suggests there had been no real incorporation of sanitarian principles into his view of epidemic disease.

There is more evidence for development of sanitarian views in the case of

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[14] Rev J W Buckley, St Mary's Paddington, 15 November 1849.

[15] "National Humiliation", by "a London Incumbent", 21 March 1855.

John Cumming, a well-known preacher of the National Scottish Church. He served a prosperous congregation at Covent Garden, but also ran ragged schools for children of the poor [16]. As an evangelical and biblical literalist deeply interested in eschatology, it is less surprising that he should have promulgated an extreme providential view of cholera than that he should have espoused the sanitarian cause. However, he sat on the MSA committee and spoke at the opening session in 1850. His first view of cholera in a sermon of 1848 used the authority of scripture to prove that cholera was "in every instance the immediate infliction of God...to punish sin". He admitted the "relative importance of second causes" but insisted these were secondary to the role of the Great First Mover. Medicine had been "humbled by conviction of its utter weakness", he claimed, and human power had been proved impotent against a disease from which only God could deliver us. Even the very obscurity of the disease was providentially designed:

to teach us to rise above mere second causes and ascend to the true origin - the Great First and self-existent and Sovereign cause. It is to teach man that there is in the midst of us a Divine Power that acts when, where and how He pleases. As long as man can account for everything ...he is disposed to act and feel atheistically: but when no science can explain and no experience can unfold it - when all is wrapped in mystery - then man is led to look upward and see in it, not the prescription of chance or effects of accident, but the presence and the finger of God [17].

His Humiliation Day sermon of September 1849 maintained the same emphasis on divine judgement for sin with more specific criticism of those, especially newspapers, who offered explanations "in terms of dead material laws" [18]. He was eager to enlist authorities belatedly converted to a religious interpretation, such as The Times, to strengthen his argument, and quoted at length from William Farr and S G Osborne to this end. Apparently not recognising the well-known initials, he assumed from the prominence of S G Osborne's article that he was "a

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[16] John Cumming 1807-81, took up his post at Covent Garden in 1832. According to the Morning Advertiser, he promoted "evangelical truth to a large and fashionable audience and thus was the means of great good among the upper classes of society".

[17] John Cumming, "A psalm for the day: Divine prescriptions in time of cholera", sermon of 1848.

[18] One of many local Humiliation Days held in the absence of a nationally appointed one, this sermon was delivered on 21 September 1849.

high official connected with The Times", and used Osborne's plea for national prayer as evidence of widening acknowledgement of divine involvement in the epidemic [19]. Farr's comment on the decline in mortality after a special day of prayer was similarly represented as evidence that "a high official" who normally "makes no pretension to anything remarkable in the shape of religion" had been forced to acknowledge the connection between prayer and relief, a fact "enough to convert a nation". Clearly eager to invoke a figure of authority to support his biblically-based interpretation, Cumming was less suspicious than Statham about Farr's motives. In fact Farr's comment on the rapid decline in mortality was ambiguous:

as if by anticipation it began to subside, so that the time was most appropriate...light began to dawn and prayers, half-supplication, half-thanksgiving rose from the heart of the people [20].

Farr proceeded to assess the significance of such religious acts, and concluded that whether the earnestness of the nation or the truth of God is regarded, a prayer for health is more significant in England than in "pagan" countries, and therefore represented a pledge for government action. After quoting Farr at length, Cumming continued his sermon by recommending improvements to the homes of the poor since "to elevate physically is one sure way to reform morally and religiously". He concluded with a warning of further "judgements" to come and by demanding that his congregation should therefore choose between belief and "atheism" on this issue, exerted pressure towards a providential view of cholera.

In the secular context of the first Public Meeting of the MSA a few months later Cumming again asserted that the recent epidemic was a judgement, but now conceded that "even as a judgment, man's foul hand as well as God's holy hand, was visible in it". His main argument for sanitary reform on this occasion was as a means to achieve the end of social reform:

sanitary conditions are preventing education of the poor. Sanitary reformers will do more to commend Christianity to a class to which it appears in unprepossessing form. The recent epidemic was a judgment but with blessing in its train...paternal as well as penal...as a chastisement it pointed

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[19] S G Osborne's letter of 20 September 1849: see below for biographical detail.  
[20] William Farr, Report on the Mortality of Cholera 1848/9.

out neglected duties [21]

This shift in emphasis could show he had come to see cholera in a less exclusively biblical way, or it could simply reflect a different style of discourse for a non-pulpit occasion.

A more significant development in his views seems to have taken place by the time of the third epidemic in 1853. In a sermon entitled "The moral aspect of cholera" he presented a new interpretation of the divine role in epidemics. Cholera was no longer held to be a direct infliction by God. He now argued that plague and pestilence were the normal and natural condition of a fallen world, therefore God's hand is seen in respite from these calamities, not the infliction of them. While he traced the epidemic to the great primal sin, and believed it to have been held in solution in the atmosphere since the fall, he held that man created sinfully the conductors of it, by allowing the thick growth of dirt, poisonous drainage, and starving humanity. He held all repentance on account of sin to be unreal unless it set out forthwith to root out the nests of pestilence, to remove the conductors of it, and where it had struck, to aid and facilitate the appliance of medical skill. It was a merciful arrangement that every punishment reflects the special sin that provoked it. We should praise God for health. We should blame sin or ourselves for pestilence [22].

While this new interpretation of cholera remains scripturally-based, the ideas presented are more compatible with a sanitarian model than his previous statements. Man's responsibility for causing and preventing epidemic disease has now become paramount in a world where epidemics are produced by constantly-acting natural laws rather than intermittent interventions. Emphasis on the need for continuous efforts to hold back the forces of entropy gives religious sanction to statutory sanitary measures, rather than sporadic sanitary campaigns. Thus, within what remains an orthodox Christian world view, there seems to have been some modification towards compatibility with a sanitarian model of epidemic disease.

A similar shift is seen in the case of Charles Blomfield. Of the five bishops

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[21] MSA First Report (1850).

[22] Delivered in London in October 1853, this sermon was extensively quoted in Newcastle Journal 8 October 1853.



on the founding committee [23] only Blomfield was associated with a city with significant public health problems, and only in his case is there evidence of previous activity in sanitary reform. As Bishop of London from 1828 until 1857, Blomfield experienced all three of the midcentury cholera epidemics. He was a friend and admirer of Edwin Chadwick, with whom he cooperated for many years in sanitary and Poor Law activities. The Malthusian views he held upon Poor Law issues in 1827 seem to have undergone some change by 1850, and it is suggested that his ideas on epidemic disease also evolved during this period. He was regarded by some contemporaries as a liberal and reforming bishop, bridging the gulf between the evangelical and tractarian wings of the Anglican church during a critical period of transition and reform [24], though his administration was condemned by the Record as the "vacillating Episcopate". According to his biographer, Blomfield was an active combatant against the two phenomena then threatening national religion, "papal aggression" and the "spirit of unbelief". His awareness of the growth of indifference and "infidelity" amongst the urban poor, combined with a realization that moral uplift could not be achieved in the presence of physical degradation, provided strong motivation for espousing sanitary reform.

In 1831, however, Blomfield saw cholera primarily as a demonstration of the workings of providence in national affairs. At a time of political instability during the Reform Bill debates, he perceived cholera as an instrument of "chastisement...to humble the pride of the great and curb the headstrong passions of the multitude" [25], a theme which he enlarged upon in his Humiliation Day sermon delivered in the Chapel Royal. Here, in the words of his biographer, Blomfield "fearlessly interpreted the character and purpose of the visitation" before the royal family in asserting his conviction that:

such a Providential interference in the state and fortunes of nations is an obvious feature of the Divine government of the world...a conviction derived from our notions of a Providence, asserted in scripture, and not unconfirmed

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[23] These included the Bishops of London, Winchester, Ripon, Chichester and Peterborough.

[24] G E Biber, Bishop Blomfield and his Times (1857).

[25] Blomfield, Coronation sermon of 1831.

by the testimony of experience [26]

He asserted that both nations and individuals were subject to the peculiar operations of divine providence, but caution was necessary in applying general principles to particular events, especially in cases such as earthquake, inundation and pestilence, when the good perish in equal numbers with the wicked; these could be lessons rather than judgements. However, national punishments could be more confidently ascribed to divine action than rewards. Further, he said,

a deep sense of the sins and vices of the age, the studied exclusion of religion from the ordinary intercourse of modern society and the neglect of the Sabbath, deserved if they had not brought down upon it the heavy visitation of God's wrath [27]

A change of emphasis is apparent in his pronouncements on cholera seventeen years later. National sin was no longer held to be the main causal factor, except in the very specific sinfulness of failing to remove the evils which made the poor especially vulnerable to disease. In his pastoral letter of November 1849 he accepted the direct connection between living conditions and disease:

Judging from the unvarying tenor of reports made by medical inspectors...I do not hesitate to declare my belief that by far the greater number of those who have fallen victim ...might have been saved...had timely and effectual measures been taken for cleansing and ventilating their dwellings [28]

But the message of the sermon delivered the same week was the necessity of acknowledging God's hand in bringing the epidemic to an end. He described cholera as a disease "untraceable in its origin, undefinable as to its nature, so rapid in its progress [that it] baffled the researches of science, forcing even the thoughtless and presumptuous to recognise the hand of God" [29]. This seems to be evidence of the use of different explanatory models for different audiences, emphasising the possibilities of practical prevention to his clergy, while preaching more explicitly than previously on divine involvement to his congregation. And on another platform, in his opening remarks as Chairman of the MSA, he stressed that "devout acknowledgement of divine mercy" should be shown by greater preventive

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[26] "When Thy judgements are in the earth", 21 March 1832.

[27] Blomfield, "When Thy judgements", 21 March 1832.

[28] Blomfield, Pastoral Letter, November 1849.

[29] Blomfield, sermon at St Pauls, 16 November 1849.

measures to eradicate zymotic disease [30].

His Pastoral Letter of 1853, according to his biographer merely a reissue of 1847, maintained the same duality, emphasising both practical and spiritual aspects of the clergyman's duty during an epidemic. The primary duty is spiritual, to inspire "implicit trust" and "entire submission" to divine will, consistent with his description of cholera "tracing in characters even the careless can hardly fail to read, the power of God and helplessness of man". However, real piety also entails removing physical causes, since we cannot expect divine aid to save us from our own negligence.

He returned to the theme of providence in the destinies of nations in his General Fast Day sermon for the Crimean war. He again admitted uncertainty in interpreting the providential meaning of particular events, but insisted nevertheless that

the danger of our mistaking the bearings of God's providence is no reason for our not acknowledging them...whether they be tokens of God's particular favour or displeasure or resulting from ordinary movements of his providence, they are to be ascribed to Him...and [are] dependent upon his will [31]

Rather than perceiving calamities such as war and pestilence as direct judicial visitations, he suggested that the most satisfactory notion of divine providence is that:

all events which are continually taking place are the immediate effects of its agency. The course of nature is nothing else than the will of God, causing certain effects in a continued, regular and uniform manner.

This is a broader conception of providential action than in his earlier sermons, and seems to have developed from questioning the nature of divine purpose in succeeding epidemics. As with Cumming, there has been a movement away from special intervention towards the ordinary course of nature as sufficient causal explanation of epidemic disease. "Judicial visitation" has given way to the natural effects of neglecting God's laws. This is consistent with increasing emphasis on instructing clergymen on their practical duties, to safeguard the physical as well as

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[30] Blomfield, Chairman's remarks, MSA Report 1850.

[31] Blomfield, Sermon on the General Fast Day for Crimean War, 21 March 1855.

the moral health of their parishioners during epidemics. Both appear to demonstrate the influence of sanitarian ideas upon his conception of epidemic disease. Although Blomfield seems at times to have questioned orthodox doctrine in this area, and to some extent modified his ideas of its mode of action, the role of providence in epidemics remains throughout a central feature which runs parallel to, rather than fusing with, his sanitarian approach to cholera. This then seems to be example of syncretism - basically retaining a providential model and incorporating sanitarian elements, rather than making a synthesis which transforms both components.

In contrast, some Anglican clergymen found public health ideas entirely consistent with a less scripturally-based religious world-view. Charles Kingsley is an example of a Broad Churchman whose theological position seemed to present no barrier to new ideas across a wide scientific and social spectrum. His concern for the physical well-being of his flock long predated his interest in cholera; he embraced the sanitary idea as a natural part of the pastoral role, eagerly absorbed the latest medical theories of disease and incorporated them into his personal religious outlook. He explicitly condemned political economists, charitable bodies and especially clergymen who failed to take up the sanitary cause. In his essay "A mad world my masters" [32] he compared sanitary science with geology in that "it interferes with that *Deus ex machina* theory of human affairs which has been in all ages the stronghold of priestcraft". Sanitary science revealed the operation of continuous laws rather than divine interference as the cause of epidemics, and so deprived priests of their privileged role as interpreters of "visitations".

The preface to his cholera sermons "Who causes pestilence?" contains further possible explanations for the clergy's lack of enthusiasm: the artificial separation of secular and spiritual domains, mentioned earlier, and the fear of offending wealthy parishioners who were landlords of insanitary lodging houses. Though not personally at risk from cholera, the latter would have had to bear the cost of

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[32] Charles Kingsley "A mad world, my masters" by a Sanitary Reformer, Fraser's Magazine 57 (1858) p.133-42.

sanitary reform in their parish [33]. In this preface Kingsley expressed gratitude to Palmerston for his refusal to authorise National Humiliation in 1853, thereby preventing:

fresh scandal for Christianity and fresh excuses for the selfishness, laziness and ignorance, which produce pestilence...turning men's minds away from the real causes of the present judgment to fanciful and superstitious ones [34].

His hostility to what he saw as superstition regarding cholera was further developed in the novel Two Years Ago, which portrayed the fear and religious hysteria induced in a cholera-smitten village by an evangelical preacher. Kingsley revealed his aversion for the style and doctrine of those who used cholera as a demonstration of divine judgement, by showing that such sermons increased vulnerability and hence mortality amongst the terrified villagers [35].

Kingsley's own sermons are an explicit exposition of his view of epidemic disease. Although he was determined to widen understanding of the physical processes involved and used the pulpit to achieve this end, this in no way detracted from his belief in the providential meaning of cholera. The epidemic was indeed a "chastening" for sin, but it was a punishment "in kind" by the operation of the laws of nature and there was no breach of God's (ie natural) laws in the process. The chastening was less a punishment than a lesson to teach cleanliness. Cholera could thus be seen as proof of God's presence in the world and his unchanging rule via natural laws, a perpetual providence rather than intermittent visitor:

He who cannot see God's hand in the cholera must be blind...Cholera comes not by chance or blind necessity but at the will of a thinking person, a living God [36]

On the question of prayer he stated:

He has answered the prayers of the first two cholera epidemics in the best

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[33] "Who causes pestilence?", 1854, consisted of four cholera sermons preached at Eversley in 1849, with a preface added in 1854. The second of his three explanations given here is a version of the Fraser's Magazine article quoted above.

[34] Kingsley, Who Causes Pestilence?, Preface.

[35] Published in 1857, Two Years Ago described the cholera epidemic of 1849 in a West country (or ? Welsh) village.

[36] Sermon Four in Who Causes Pestilence? (1854).

way in which rational beings could wish...by showing how to extirpate the evil against which we prayed [37]

Kingsley returned to the question of the efficacy of prayer in a sermon of 1860, "Why should we pray for fair weather?". Here he explained his refusal to obey Bishop Wilberforce's call to pray for an end to continuous rain which threatened the harvest. On publication, this sermon attracted considerable comment, some of which, mainly from scientists, was favourable, but also much that was critical. In subsequent correspondence he explained that he did not reject the role of prayer in all calamities, only in those when men already had access to the means of saving themselves. He shared the view expressed in Palmerston's letter to the Edinburgh Presbytery, that prayer became inappropriate when human solutions were available. However, his reply to attacks which questioned his orthodoxy, "that God can and does arrange by a perpetual providence every circumstance whatsoever, so making laws take effect when and where He chooses, I believe utterly", leaves his views on the question of direct intervention somewhat ambiguous.

Does Kingsley's response to cholera exemplify syncretism or synthesis of thought? His conception of a paternal deity, derived from New rather than Old Testament scripture, seems more compatible with nineteenth-century views of the natural history of epidemic disease than many of his contemporaries' ideas. The sermons show his awareness of the need for a theodicy appropriate for the uneducated congregation of Eversley, the more sophisticated artisan class, as well as the readers of Fraser's Magazine, and suggest that he developed his own solution to the moral problems posed by cholera. The punishment by sickness and death of children and the helpless poor for the sins of their landlords is justified without recourse to a god of "cruelty and injustice", a concept alien both to Kingsley's theology and to his approach to natural science. Although the resultant personal world-view seems neither permanent nor entirely consistent, it represents a conscious attempt to synthesise the currents of thought which dominated the intellectual world of his time.

A similar but less controversial example was Kingsley's brother-in-law,

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[37] Preface, Who Causes Pestilence? (1854).

Sidney Godolphin Osborne, who like Kingsley, was involved in issues far beyond the bounds of his country living. His scientific interests and concern about rural poverty found wider expression in "the pulpit of The Times" where his "lay sermons to educated men of every creed and all forms of political faith" frequently appeared as leading articles or in specially large type [38]. His article of September 1849, which was extensively quoted in a sermon by Cumming as evidence that "the whole press" was at last coming to admit God's role in the epidemic, was in fact less supportive of Cumming's view than appeared in the sermon. Osborne's central point was a plea for more positive health measures and for less dishonest treatment of mortality statistics for commercial reasons: "does it betoken so little purpose in the hands of our God that we dare to pooh-pooh its existence lest we injure trade". It is clear that like Kingsley, he assumed a divine purpose in the epidemic while fully recognising human responsibility for creating the necessary conditions. And like Kingsley, Osborne interpreted God's role in cholera primarily as educative, rather than punitive:

God is teaching us that, as we must pay to repress the crime which we will not, by education, seek to prevent, so we must be content to receive cholera to our own bosoms, if we will not seek to prevent its advent by destruction of causes which court its presence [39]

Although Osborne supported a national gesture "to humble ourselves before Him" he clearly did not regard prayers for mercy to be a sufficient response to the crisis: "universal trust in the great disposer" did not override the need for "every proper means of human precaution" to be employed. Kingsley's and Osborne's viewpoint is thus different from Cumming's, for whom acknowledgement of God's role and national repentance were pre-eminent. When cholera returned in 1853, Osborne's letter to The Times made no mention of national humiliation. Society's neglect was seen to be the main cause and therefore society was guilty for allowing cholera to carry off the poor before they had been given a chance to raise themselves from their debased state:

bodies reared in filth, souls reared in midst of blasphemy - steeped in

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[38] Arnold White, editor, The Letters of S G Osborne in The Times 1844-88 (1890) Introduction.

[39] The Times 20 September 1849.

ignorance of all good, polluted with all knowledge of evil [40]

An even more explicit condemnation of society for failing to protect the poor and helpless was made by William Buckland, Dean of Westminster, in his Thanksgiving sermon in November 1849. His scientific background in geology and mineralogy led naturally to emphasis upon the physical aspects of the epidemic. However, his outspoken attack on deficiencies of drainage and water supply, and the "avarice and neglect" of small landlords, offended the Morning Post, which accused him of abusing the sacred nature of his office [41]. Buckland also criticised those with a "Mahometan belief in fatalism"; by excluding human free will and responsibility, and making God the direct cause of all evil as well as good in the world, they fell "into the abyss of Calvinism". The age of miracles was past, he declared, and God acts now only by second causes to maintain the ordinary mechanisms of the material world. There was much here to offend religious sensibilities beyond the pages of the Morning Post. However, Buckland insisted, there was no denial of providence in this account of the epidemic. Cholera was still held to be "God's appointed punishment for sins of uncleanness...in the moral world as in the natural world, there is connexion of cause and effect". As with Kingsley and Osborne, Buckland's view of epidemic disease embraced a moral element within a physically-determined process; providence acted by means of natural laws. This synthesis of the physical and moral universe, already apparent in his contribution to the Bridgewater Treatise more than a decade earlier, required no reshaping to explain epidemic disease.

Charles Girdlestone was one of the few non-metropolitan clergymen on the founding committee of the MSA but his experience of two severe epidemics in his parishes of Sedgeley in 1832, and Kingswinford in 1849, eminently qualified him for sanitary work. Although he was later to write and lecture on sanitary reform, his first response to cholera in the autumn of 1831 gave little indication of the direction of his future interests. His "Address to the inhabitants of Sedgeley" in November 1831 revealed deep concern for his threatened parishioners, but at this

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[40] S G Osborne, The Times, letter of 27 September 1853.

[41] See Chapter 3, p.53.



point, it was their moral condition rather than their physical health on which he focused; the "practical directions" he gave to them advised mainly on moral reform and preparation for death. He delivered several series of sermons during the first epidemic which were later published with his Addresses to his parishioners, accompanied by a statistical and descriptive account of the course of the epidemic in Sedgely [42]. The tone of both sermons and accompanying addresses were strongly moralistic, and the detailed account of the effects of the cholera outbreak upon the inhabitants reveals his commitment to their spiritual welfare. Believing all sickness to be a chastisement for sin, he had no doubt that cholera was a manifestation of God's judgement. He explained that the first function of sickness was to convince mankind of sin and the need to reform, and the second was to produce compassion for others. He also believed that earthly afflictions led to spiritual improvement, which he was able to demonstrate with examples of higher standards of behaviour in the parish during and after the epidemic. The only preventive measure he attempted at this time was to reduce vulnerability to infection, not by any physical means, but by lowering anxiety levels among his parishioners - for Girdlestone this meant maintaining a clear conscience. So the practical advice he offered, in which he urged his flock to ask whether they were fit to die; to examine their faith; repent of their sins; read the bible and pray, had a practical as well as a spiritual end. He was also aware of his duty to "improve the occasion" for wider spiritual benefits. Cholera presented the opportunity to make a religious impression upon the population at large; Girdlestone would have aimed at sober and permanent reforms, rather than the emotional conversions achieved at revival meetings presided over by some dissenting ministers.

This predominantly religious perspective on cholera was apparently transformed by his espousal of the sanitary cause. In a lecture on sanitary reform in 1853 he reviewed the history of the sanitary movement, stressing its importance in terms of reducing physical suffering and its effect upon the economy, and only thirdly in relation to moral or religious factors. He also described "the sacred

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[42] Charles Girdlestone, Four Sermons during Cholera (1832) and Seven Sermons preached during Prevalence of Cholera in Sedgely (1833).

object of raising a domestic altar in everyman's abode, by making it capable of becoming a healthful and a Christian home", thus revealing the fundamentally religious nature of his motivation. In this lecture he recognised the connections between poverty, crime and health, and praised government intervention in public health. The main point emphasised was the preventability of cholera:

no conclusion of sanitary science has been more clearly confirmed by experience than that fever and cholera, in their fatal forms, are signally preventible [43]

This represents a significant change in his view of cholera since his first encounter in 1831; epidemic disease is no longer an infliction to be endured nor is a religious interpretation the dominant response. There are also suggestions here of development in his views on wider issues than sanitation alone. On poverty and its implications for individuals and society, for example, the lecture of 1853 contrasts markedly with the views expressed in a sermon of 1847 [44]. This sermon omitted any reference to the effects of health and housing, holding the poor "for the most part answerable for their own abject poverty". Limited charity to foster self-help was the proposed remedy for poverty rather than any form of state intervention. By 1853, there seems to have been a change of view regarding both the causes and cure of this condition. The absence of any mention of sanitary reform is noteworthy, since the lecture of 1853 implied that his own awareness of the "sanitary awakening" dated from the early 1840s, predating the sermon on poverty.

It has not been possible to find any record of his reaction to the 1848/9 epidemic; the only surviving sermon from that date is on the subject of "Romanism". If absence of surviving publications indicates that he gave no sermons or addresses on cholera during the second epidemic, this would be a significant silence on a subject which was dominating pulpits and platforms throughout the country. From his willingness to raise religious aspects of sanitary reform in secular contexts, it seems unlikely that he would have abstained from

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[43] Charles Girdlestone, "Sanitary Reform", Lecture at Stourbridge Sanitary Association, 24 October 1853.

[44] The Cause and Cure of Abject Poverty, Sermon (1847).

speaking on the subject because of any desire to maintain that strict division between the sacred and secular denounced by Kingsley. A pamphlet of 1845 furnishes an example of how religious motives infused his more practical and secular writing, and helps to explain his changed position on disease [45]. In this publication on working-class housing he recognised that combating excessive sickness in town populations was "within the province of government in its paternal character". He justified using what he described as a "mechanical" approach to forwarding religious and moral aims, by the need to take advantage of "the outward and mechanical aspects of the age", as well as the necessity for physical health before "spiritual energy" can be released. He also enlarged upon the nature of disease, distinguishing between:

the diseases entailed by the infirmity of our nature, the unavoidable penalty of our fall and sin, and those which by personal or joint neglect we wantonly draw down upon ourselves or the community of which we are members. That which in the one case may be a spectacle of resignation, meet for men and angels to behold with interest, and approved by the Ruler of the universe, in the other resembles the acquiescence of a suicide...marring his Maker's work, disobeying his will, frustrating his design [46]

It seems that his acceptance of a sanitarian approach to epidemic disease prompted an examination and revision of his religious beliefs in the wider area of health. Although there is no rejection of religious doctrine which contradicts the sanitarian model, he has considerably extended the interpretation offered to parishioners during the first epidemic before prevention of such diseases was entertained. Although sanitary reform had religious and moral implications for society, acceptance of its premises reduced the moral significance of cholera at an individual level, especially for poor and helpless individuals. An awareness of this might explain why Girdlestone apparently refrained from preaching on this subject after 1840.

We have seen that Girdlestone's was not the universal response of clergymen within the sanitary movement, and it is interesting to compare their several reactions with that of a clergyman apparently without sanitarian affiliations, who

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[45] Charles Girdlestone, Letters on the Unhealthy Condition of the Lower Class of Dwellings (1845).

[46] Girdlestone, Letters on the Unhealthy Condition (1845).

had greater opportunity than most to appreciate the power of sanitary science. The Rev Samuel Arnott's parish in Soho was at the heart of what Snow described in 1855 as "the most terrible outbreak of cholera which ever occurred in this kingdom" [47]. Shortly after the removal of the Broad Street pump handle, this clergyman delivered "An address on the late visitation of cholera" [48]. The sermon made no reference to Snow's action in the parish, nor to the contamination of drinking water as a probable cause. Instead he asked his congregation to consider why God had visited their district:

It is not wrong to say that the epidemic was directed by God, because although subject to natural laws and cause and effect, it is equally obvious to every reflecting mind, that admission of the ordinary operation of natural laws is by no means inconsistent with the persuasion that this was a visitation of Providence. The Supreme Disposer guides the course of all human life...Lack of medical knowledge and mysterious causes direct minds to the Great First Cause - we are in the hands of the Ruler...His hand puts us under the influence of natural laws which express His will [49]

He admitted that although the path of the epidemic was well defined, the streets affected could not be regarded as particularly sinful. He urged, nonetheless, that the connection between sins and punishment should be acknowledged. He went on to remind his congregation how infidel opinion had been silenced during the late pestilence, as death approached. While admitting "a natural cause at work for this locality", he cited the "baffling of medical skill" and ignorance of causes as grounds for continuing to regard cholera as directed by God. The answer to the question "why here and why us", remains "providence".

This sermon is of interest in several ways, not least as a demonstration of communication lag even within a confined geographical area. There is little sign that this clergyman knew of Snow's activity in his parish even though Snow's collaborator was another Anglican clergyman [50]. However, from the

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[47] John Snow, On the Mode of Communication of Cholera (1855) quoted in C-E A Winslow, The Conquest of Epidemic Disease (New York 1967) p.273.

[48] This sermon was delivered in October 1854; the pump handle was removed on 7 September that year.

[49] Samuel Arnott, sermon of October 1854.

[50] Rev H Whitehead was Snow's collaborator in the practical work in Broad Street.

arguments presented to justify a predominantly providential view of cholera, it seems unlikely that any amount of material evidence would have affected his view. The existence of such sermons during the 1850s, apparently unaffected by a decade of developing ideas in medicine and public health, raises the question of whether the form or style of sermons to some extent determined their content. Was the tradition of the "humiliation" and "cholera" sermon so well established at this time that it had become "fossilised", leaving little scope for inclusion of new ideas within its format, at least in the hands of less able and thoughtful clerics?

Conybeare reported that sets of sermons were available for purchase by clergymen of "sluggish mediocrity" from the "stagnant" extremes of both wings of the church, the "high and dry" and the "low and slow" [51]. This provided a means of perpetuating theological interpretations of cholera long after they had been discarded by younger and more educated contemporaries. The evidence from material in this study does not suggest that this was a major factor, since these sermons have shown considerable changes in providential doctrine over the period reviewed, and many, like the Soho sermon, show signs of being written for the occasion rather than to a standard formula. There is presumably a bias towards the more gifted and innovative preachers in the pool of sermons which were published and survive, and this bias is no doubt reflected in the sermons in this study. However, since it was the clerical elite who responded to intellectual challenges and became opinion-leaders in the wider society, focusing on their sermons is appropriate.

This case study has shown that clerical sanitarians were far from a homogeneous subgroup of the clerical profession; no obvious theological, political or social common factors emerged to explain their membership of the MSA. It is not surprising therefore that their response to cholera was also far from homogeneous. In spite of this heterogeneity however, it became clear that all of them perceived the role of providence as highly relevant to the subject of epidemic disease. Their initial perceptions of cholera range from interpretations in terms of

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[51] Conybeare, "Church Parties", quoted advertisements from *The Guardian* and *The Record* for these two groups respectively.

acts of judgement and chastisement to explanations based upon the operation of natural laws, but all explicitly within some form of providential framework. In spite of their differences, it emerges that a common feature of their responses was a shift in perceptions of divine involvement away from a judgemental, interventionist role towards a more distant, though still purposeful, overseeing of natural laws, by the time of the third epidemic. In some cases, for example Blomfield, Cumming and Girdlestone, this development was fairly explicit. In others the evidence is essentially negative, in that there appeared to be no public reiteration in 1853/4 of their earlier assertions of divine intervention, which is only suggestive of a changed viewpoint from that expressed in 1849 or earlier.

Can these changes be related to exposure to secular models of epidemic disease through a connection with the MSA? For some individuals it would appear this was the case. Girdlestone and Blomfield, for example both spoke of the impression made upon them by sanitary science, but in most cases it is difficult to determine whether this, or some less precise stimulus, was the spur to change. There is no evidence that awareness of the ethical difficulties of some providential interpretations of cholera provided such a stimulus. Although to punish the poor for "national sins", or for the avarice of their landlords, might seem the action of a deity of dubious morality, cholera did not appear to be an issue with those doubters whose loss of faith stemmed from disillusionment with Christian ethics [52]. Among clerics closely involved with the epidemics, Kingsley and Buckland were unusual in drawing attention to this aspect of orthodox interpretations.

This sample of clergymen furnishes examples of each of Conybeare's hypothesised modes of coping with incompatible ideas [53]. Among the Pulpit clergymen in 1849 are clear examples of those rejecting the new "truths" of sanitary science in favour of long-held biblical explanations. Their apparent abstention from delivering providential cholera sermons during the third epidemic is compatible with either an increasing compartmentalization of thought after their

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[52] H R Murphy, "The ethical revolt against Christian orthodoxy" American Historical Review LX (1955) p.800-817.

[53] See above p.186.

MSA experience, or the adoption of more sanitarian views of cholera. There is also evidence of individuals revising their view of the mode of divine action to accord better with contemporary understanding of the mechanisms of epidemic disease. And there are also examples of clerics attempting to synthesise a traditional providential view of disease with their understanding of a more scientific sanitarian model, even though the consequences were, in Conybeare's words, at times irreconcilable. Although Kingsley and Blomfield came to see sanitary reform as an integral part of the practice of the clerical role, inconsistencies between their various expositions on the epidemics suggest some intellectual confusion persisted. This seems to have arisen from the difficulty of accommodating incompatible ideas about the nature of providential action. They had a professional obligation, and possibly a psychological desire or need to retain the possibility of direct intervention and divine response to prayer, while intellectually accepting that diseases result from mankind's breaching of regular and predictable physical laws.

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## Chapter 9

### CONCLUSIONS

The main hypotheses under investigation in this study were that changing conceptions of providence can provide an index of the wider process of secularization of thought, and that reactions to the recurring cholera epidemics in mid-nineteenth century England present a means of monitoring change in perceptions of the nature and extent of providential involvement in human affairs. It was also suggested that an empirical approach could contribute to assessing the relative importance of social and economic, as opposed to intellectual, factors in promoting religious change, as well as documenting more precisely the timing of such change. The survey also provided an opportunity to explore within a specific historical context the relevance and explanatory power of a range of concepts derived from the broad secularization thesis.

The results establish the feasibility and validity of tracing changing conceptions of providence in the context of epidemic cholera, although the different sources explored here varied in the extent to which they could fulfil the other aims. Reference has been made in earlier chapters to particular difficulties in locating comparable sources over the twenty-four year period. A more general problem was that sources were not equally amenable to systematic study. The more sporadic nature of the medical and domestic mission material compared with newspaper and periodical publications, for example, inevitably influenced the confidence with which conclusions could be drawn for different sections of society. Nonetheless a picture of changing attitudes across a wide spectrum of society was obtained by analysis of religious perceptions of cholera at three points in time. The variation between different sources and social groups has not obscured the most important finding that significant changes in providential interpretations of epidemic cholera did indeed occur during this period. Among the other findings was an indication that perceptions of divine action in relation to epidemic cholera were not merely isolated or atypical responses evoked by an unusually alarming situation. It became clear that an involvement of providence in worldly affairs was an integral feature of many contemporary world-views.



Although cholera provoked its own specific questions and responses, it also became the focal point of a wider and continuing debate about the nature of providence within the context of both a questioning and a reformulation of traditional beliefs in the face of rapid social, educational and economic change. While accepted by many simply as a timely manifestation of divine power, cholera also appears to have been used by others more opportunistically, both in doctrinal disagreements and in rival claims to authority by different religious and secular groups. A further question raised is whether the midcentury years provide an earlier example of the cultural and professional rivalry later displayed in the "prayer gauge" debates of the 1870s. These issues will be reviewed in greater depth in this final section.

The results of these surveys do not support a simplistic secularization thesis of steady decline in religiousness throughout the twenty-four year period, but show a more complicated picture of change involving a variety of providential interpretations of cholera at different times. Although the overall decline in intensity and volume of religious responses to cholera between 1831 and 1854 is consistent with an explanatory model based on the secularizing effects of increased understanding and control of disease processes, the most striking finding - that providential interpretations of cholera in some publications were at a peak during the second epidemic - is at odds with Morris's observation that "the religious response was more muted" in 1849, and needs a different explanation [1]. The absence of this peak in religious periodicals, and the divergence between the different sources in 1853/4 is also noteworthy. As suggested in chapter 4, the decline in references to cholera in religious periodicals after the first epidemic is to some extent a reflection of the nature of the medium, although it also indicates the type of readership targeted. The developing interest during the third epidemic in the newspaper press in moral and sanitary aspects, as opposed to purely religious aspects of cholera, was not mirrored in the sermons surveyed. For reasons to be examined later, clergymen seemed to prefer to remain silent on the subject of cholera in sermons during the third epidemic rather than modify their approach

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[1] R J Morris, Cholera 1831, p.202.

to it.

Before examining the implications of these findings for a process of secularization, several possible explanations for extreme providentialism regarding cholera during the second epidemic will be considered. Firstly, the steep and unremitting rise in mortality during the summer of 1849 is likely to have been a contributing factor. The Metropolitan Sanitary Association published figures showing that death rates in London during the second epidemic were rivalled only by the Plague of 1665. Deaths from zymotic disease [2] rose steadily during the 1840s but were dramatically increased by cholera in 1849:

Table 9.1 Deaths from Zymotic Disease

1846	9596
1847	14039
1848	18113
1849	28313

Source: Metropolitan Sanitary Association, Report 1850.

Extreme apprehension was therefore a reasonable reaction; combined with disillusionment with much-vaunted preventive measures, this might well have sparked a reversion to more traditional responses. Supernatural protection would thus have been sought as a direct consequence of the perceived failure of available alternatives. The changing tone of editorial comment in the press as mortality rates rose during the summer months supports this hypothesis [3]. The continuation of such sentiments after the epidemic had peaked is less readily explained in these terms, although the well-attended special services during and immediately after the height of the epidemic is evidence of wide popular support for recognising divine involvement in the epidemic. Although most of this heightened religious behaviour did not persist for long, as the testimony of Methodists and others lamenting the short-lived revivalist fervour shows, even temporary recourse to such acts indicates that large numbers still held a world-view in which supernatural involvement in

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[2] The term zymotic is defined earlier, p.187.

[3] The Registrar General's monthly mortality figures for 1849 are given in Chapter 3, p.68.

epidemic disease was regarded as at least plausible. This is not incompatible with simultaneous acceptance of alternative explanatory models, as behaviour in a twentieth century cholera epidemic has demonstrated. Hsu's study of the response of a traditional Chinese community with access to western medicine showed that under extreme conditions, individuals tended to resort to both religious and scientific remedies simultaneously, the contrasting approaches not being seen as mutually exclusive [4]. In similar circumstances, a mid-nineteenth century English population may have sought medical aid, supported sanitary reform and also joined the ranks of the devout in special services of humiliation and thanksgiving. It could be argued that attendance rates at special church services provide more useful measures than the census figures widely used in secularization research, as an indication of the prevalence of passive or dormant religiousness. Motives for church-going in exceptional circumstances such as national disasters are probably less diverse and complex, and perhaps more religiously inspired, than regular Sunday attendance.

An alternative explanation for a peaking of providential views in 1848/9 is that they were fuelled by a prevailing background anxiety about the growth of "irreligion", anxiety which was heightened by the government's failure to give a clear religious lead on cholera. Cholera was seen as a test case to which it was vital the government responded correctly, since official neglect of this public duty would have further undermined the standing of religious values in popular perceptions. Thus concerned individuals, motivated primarily by religious belief rather than any professional interest, may have promoted a strongly religious view of cholera as a means of reasserting the place of religion in society. In this context, the vehement tone of criticism of government inaction over national humiliation becomes understandable. The fact that the second epidemic occurred very shortly after the continental revolutions of 1848 would have intensified a fear that social disintegration might follow any weakening of the religious underpinning of society. Pre-existing apprehension at the possibility of social disruption at home would have been further aggravated by the onset of another epidemic, since both

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[4] F L K Hsu, Religion, Science and Human Crises (1952) Chapters 7-9.

at home and abroad previous outbreaks had been associated with civil disturbance. The unexpected severity of the epidemic as it developed then provided the opportunity for very public religious statements to be made at a critical time. The evangelical concern to preserve a "righteous nation" provided especially strong motivation for many to pursue this course [5]. The prevalence of pre-millennial ideas amongst evangelicals at this time would also have evoked more extreme providential interpretations of cholera; like revolutions and other unusual events, epidemics were taken as a sign of the imminence of the Second Coming. A survey among Anglican evangelical clergy in 1855 reported that fifty percent held pre-millennial views; if this held for other denominations pre-millennianism was clearly a powerful factor [6].

The rising strength of the sanitary movement at the end of the 1840s is another factor which can be linked to the religious response to cholera. Before the development of a public health bureaucracy, the clergy had provided the main social network available to respond to a disaster such as a major epidemic. Like Girdlestone, many clergymen had played a vital part in alleviating distress during the epidemic of 1831/2 and had voiced the only authoritative interpretation of the event heard in their parishes. Such individuals may have felt marginalized by other professionals within the public health sphere who, by the end of the 1840s, had become more prominent players. In seeking to resume a dominant role in their communities when cholera again threatened, there would have been a tendency to assert a traditional religious response more aggressively because they were now excluded by lack of relevant expertise from full participation in sanitary activities. The failure of sanitary measures to curb the epidemic in 1849 gave an opportunity to such clergymen to reassert an exclusively religious view.

This interpretation is in line with Kingsley's accusation that a jealous guarding of their right to be sole interpreters of disasters such as epidemics was one explanation for the refusal of clergymen to cooperate in sanitary reform.

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[5] Best, "The Evangelicals and the Established Church", (1959) p.63-78; Rennie, "Evangelicalism and English Public Life" (1962).

[6] This survey was quoted by Hempton, "Evangelicalism and eschatology" (1980) p.179-194.

Generational and educational factors would have been important in determining an individual's response to this situation; unfortunately relevant biographical data could not be discovered for most of the clergymen displaying strongly providential positions on cholera in 1849. The fact that several of the Pulpit clergy who delivered such sermons appeared on the MSA committee shortly afterwards is difficult to reconcile with this explanation, unless their reaction was an example of joining the opposition in the face of impending defeat.

The more intense religious response in 1849 might also be seen as a symptom of a deeper professional and cultural rivalry, a forerunner of that which underlay the prayer gauge debate of 1872. Turner's analysis of this controversy, which followed a rift between the medical and clerical professions over the illness of the Prince of Wales in 1871, concluded that the conflict was more "a clash of elites than of ideas" [7]. The prayer gauge test was proposed anonymously in the Contemporary Review of July 1872 supposedly as a means of "demonstrating the real power of prayer" by careful observation of mortality rates on comparable wards of a London hospital, one of which would have the benefit of regular offerings of "The Prayer for the Sick". This proposal was never put into practice but provoked a long-running debate upon the efficacy of prayer, which Turner saw as the culmination of more than ten years controversy about the holding of official prayers for national events. This practice, eschewed by the Anglican Church during the eighteenth century, was revived for cholera *inter alia* during the nineteenth century, but did not become a controversial issue until Palmerston rejected calls for national humiliation in 1853. The clerical profession's emphasis on the role of national prayer and their undervaluing of medical skill in effecting the recovery of the Prince from typhoid in 1871, seemed to Turner to be less a reflection of different views about the efficacy of prayer than a rivalry between established and emerging elites vying for "cultural leadership and prestige". Also at issue, presumably, was the empirical basis of knowledge.

The response to the second cholera epidemic which my research has exposed

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[7] F Turner, "Rainfall, plagues and the Prince of Wales: a chapter in the conflict of science and religion", Journal of British Studies xiii (1974), p.46-65.

might thus be seen as evidence that this sort of tension between the professions existed earlier. Doctors had been excluded by Edwin Chadwick from a prominent role in the field of public health since the mid-40s. Poor Law doctors were still underpaid and exploited, and the few prestigious public medical appointments were heavily oversubscribed. So by 1849 many ambitious and socially-concerned doctors in search of advancement had become prominent in the voluntary sanitary movement. The clergy's publicising of providential interpretations of cholera and their demand for official statements to endorse divine involvement in the epidemic could have been a means of protecting the professional territory of the clergy from encroachment by the emerging rival profession. The absence of medical criticism of providential explanations, and the often defensive-sounding language used by doctors when discussing the role of providence in epidemics could be seen as the natural caution of newcomers, wary of offending clerical colleagues as they aspired to take over the dominant role in guarding the nation's health. We have seen in Chapter 6 how medical interests were much broader than the cure of purely physical diseases, so the clergy had cause to fear being eclipsed in this context. The diplomacy and caution with which the surgeon Henry Thompson introduced the prayer gauge, and the reactions to it by the medical fraternity, are consistent with a continuing need, several decades later, for doctors to avoid overstepping the bounds of "respectability" in the expression of religious opinion. It was a non-medical publication, the Spectator, which published the claim that "popular belief in prayer and providential judgement blocked the path of sanitary reform" [8]. The Lancet stated less tendentiously, "while we recognise the hand of Providence we still claim for modern medical science that she has won fresh laurels in the recovery of the Prince" [9]. This may be no more than a further example of the power of informal social coercion to maintain outward conformity to orthodox religious opinion, recognised by many to be an important factor until the last decades of the century [10]. An alternative interpretation is that the Lancet, not usually averse to giving offence, was in this case showing sensitivity

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[8] Spectator, VL (1872) 1012, Letter from "Protagoras".

[9] The Lancet 1 (1872) p.123.

[10] For example, H McLeod in Class and Religion (1974) p.228.

to the religious views of its own (medical) readers. Although cultural rivalry remains a plausible interpretation of the events of 1872, it is perhaps less persuasive when applied to professional responses to cholera in 1849, and does not explain the difference between the religious responses to the second and third epidemics.

Professor Chadwick has suggested that a declining sense of providence, in evidence by the final decades of the century, was associated with the decline of Calvinism. Although the direction of a causal relationship is debatable, Chadwick preferred to explain declining Calvinism in terms of a diminishing sense of providence rather than *vice versa* [11]. There is contemporary evidence for the decline of strict or high Calvinism by the midcentury, though this may have resulted in a drift towards a more moderate Calvinism rather than an overall decline. The demise of high Calvinism has been seen as an effect of the cooling of evangelical enthusiasm during the 1830s and 1840s. Wilfred Stone, for example, who has drawn his evidence from the life and works of William Hale White, believes that doctrinal differences between Calvinist and Arminian evangelicals, which were disregarded during the heat of the evangelical revival, came under scrutiny with the return of a more rational mood in the 1840s and were then found divisive [12]. The doctrine of double predestination in particular seemed anachronistic to those exposed to the Romantic influences which had by then percolated widely throughout society. In autobiographical notes, Hale White described how he was "drawn from the meeting house by Carlyle" in 1851 [13], and Mark Rutherford, his autobiographical persona, was depicted similarly liberated by Wordsworth's "God of the hills" [14]. Calvinist doctrine also jarred with the emotional and more personal relationship with their deity aspired to by evangelicals. Without consciously espousing Arminianism, many evangelicals out of sympathy with the "intellectual rigour" demanded by

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[11] Chadwick, The Secularization of the European Mind p.262.

[12] Wilfred Stone, The Religion and Art of William Hale White (Stanford 1954) p.22.

[13] William Hale White, The Early Life of Mark Rutherford: notes put together by his son, W Hale White, in 1913.

[14] William Hale White, Mark Rutherford (1881) p.19.

puritanism, drifted towards the less systematic theology of moderate Calvinism. RW Dale declared that moderate Calvinism was Calvinism in decay, a statement whose truth appears to be borne out by the fact that cooperation between moderate Calvinists and Arminians on the Christian Observer led to the suppression of Calvinist doctrines in the interests of evangelicalism [15].

However, in my view, these changes in the character and strength of Calvinism do not contribute very much to explaining the rapid change in responses to cholera between 1849 and 1853, unless it was by virtue of the associated decline in the authority of scripture. The growing awareness of biblical criticism after 1850 gradually weakened traditional faith in the literal truth of the Bible, with the result that biblical texts could not provide such powerful arguments from the pulpit. The strident tone of much biblical preaching in 1849 might indicate the heat of controversy on this issue at that time, followed by declining use of Old Testament texts as the basis for sermons. Although Hale White emphasised the positive attraction of a more immanent deity in explaining Mark Rutherford's rejection of Calvinism, he himself was expelled from theological college in 1852 for questioning the authenticity and inspiration of parts of the Bible, evidence of the relevance and extremely controversial nature of this issue during the midcentury years.

Biblical criticism was an issue which had wider relevance since the entire evangelical movement, encompassing both Calvinist and Arminian traditions, was essentially Bible-based. Thus the influence of developments within evangelicalism as a whole upon responses to cholera must also be considered. As a result of the growth in evangelically-held livings during these years, there were greater numbers of evangelical clergy available, especially in London, to preach and for their sermons to be published during the second epidemic than the first. Peter Toon's figures show a doubling in the proportion of evangelical clergy from one eighth to one quarter between 1829 and 1853 [16]. The relatively restrained response to cholera in 1832 could thus be partly a reflection of the relatively small number of

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[15] Rennie, "Evangelicalism and English public life" (1962).

[16] Peter Toon, Evangelical Theology 1833-56: the Response to Tractarianism (1979) p.2.



evangelical incumbents at that time compared with 1849. The difference between responses to the first and second epidemics may also have mirrored the changed character of evangelicalism in the generations which followed the early dominance of the Clapham Sect. Elizabeth Jay has described how the broader social base and lack of authoritative leadership after the 1830s resulted in a "dreary thinness" of theology and greater dependence on a literal interpretation of the Bible [17].

As noted earlier, Conybeare was critical of the rigidity, intolerance and narrowness of the second wave of evangelicals, especially their dogma of verbal inspiration. These changes in evangelicalism help to explain the difference between responses in 1832 and 1849, but not between 1849 and 1853/4. Perhaps the summer of 1849 can be seen as a watershed for providentialism, when sanitarianism, which must have seemed to many to exclude any religious dimension from explaining and preventing the disease, forced a polarization of views. Moderate religious opinion may have reacted to the challenge by taking up more extreme positions, but this fragmentation of religious views may have had an ultimately weakening effect, reducing their plausibility, and leading to their eclipse in 1853/4.

The relevance of political or economic motives for upholding providential interpretations in 1849 must also be considered. The Morning Post's rebuke of Buckland [18] for emphasising practical rather than spiritual aspects of epidemic disease must be suspected of reflecting the viewpoint of threatened commercial and property-owning interests. The imposition of more regulation over housing and drainage, recognised as essential to improve water supplies, was resisted by those who distrusted the encroachment of central government into local affairs as well as by landlords with purely financial motives. Criticism of Buckland's sermon could also have reflected the Establishment view that more public assertions of the power of religion were needed to maintain social control and stability, as discussed earlier. While political motives could underlie the expression of religious attitudes towards cholera and its prevention, there is also a considerable body of evidence to show the reverse effect, namely that underlying

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[17] Elizabeth Jay, The Evangelical and Oxford Movements, (Cambridge, 1983), Introductory Chapter.

[18] See Chapter 3 p.53.

religious beliefs could determine how social and economic policy evolved at this time. Boyd Hilton has attempted to relate contrasting attitudes towards social and economic questions, such as the role of charity and Poor Law issues, to the religious beliefs of "extreme" and "moderate" types of evangelicals [19]. He argues that moderate evangelicals tended to rely on a "just" providential order, acting through natural laws, to solve social problems, whereas extreme evangelicals, who laid more emphasis upon the role of special and particular acts of providence, tended to adopt more paternalist and interventionist solutions. According to Hilton, the Irish famine caused a questioning of the idea that divine retributive justice was administered by means of natural disasters. There was certainly a debate about whether the famine was an act of special or of general providence since many felt this should determine which, if any, countermeasures to apply. Government intervention would have been regarded as inappropriate if the famine was an act of general providence, when the laws of nature should be left to act without interference. Gladstone and Chalmers both considered this question. The absence of second causes persuaded the former, and the fact that the famine was not uniformly severe, convinced the latter, that the famine was an act of special, rather than general, providence, and that government intervention was therefore justified. As we have seen, cholera also stimulated debate about the meaning and purpose of providential action, but it seems clear that the epidemic of 1849 was regarded in an entirely different light from the famine. While the fact that the latter affected the Irish rather than the home population may have been pertinent, it is noteworthy that with cholera there was no inclination to leave prevention or cure to the laws of nature. Nor did any evidence emerge to support Hilton's assertion that ideas of retribution were rejected during the midcentury years; as we have seen, such ideas were in fact extremely prominent during the second epidemic.

There were clearly a number of special circumstances, both religious and secular, to explain the peaking of providential interpretations during the second

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[19] Boyd Hilton, "The role of providence in Evangelical social thought" (1985) p.229-33: The Age of Atonement, (Oxford 1988), chapter 2 and *passim*.

epidemic without necessarily invalidating the hypothesised underlying longer-term secularizing process. As suggested above, a secular explanation framed entirely in terms of professional rivalry is implausible, though it is probable that several of the factors outlined, including political and economic issues, converged to create the unusual atmosphere of 1849. The explanation most pertinent here, that a predominantly religious response was heightened by fear and helplessness in the face of a novel threat, lends plausibility to the "gaps" model of secularization by exemplifying that phenomenon in reverse [20]. The "gap" in man's control of his environment which sanitary science had promised to close was found to be still open after all, prompting a return to the security of more traditional responses. Over the longer time span of a quarter of a century however, the direction of change can be seen as a move away from a view of cholera as an expression of divine purpose or judgement, towards acceptance that it was a natural disease only distantly associated with the moral universe. Analysis of responses to cholera have shown that conceptions of providence could change in two distinct ways. Firstly, certain areas or phenomena could be explicitly removed from the domain of providential action, as apparent advances in human knowledge or control rendered this level of explanation unnecessary. Secondly, the nature of providential action could be modified or diluted to reduce the strength or immediacy of the causal relationship. Both these reactions occurred during the period of this study. Examples of the first include explicit statements by Kingsley, Palmerston and the Morning Post which, during the third epidemic, asserted that cholera no longer required a supernatural explanation, nor was prayer the appropriate remedy, because society could now be seen to be responsible for both causing and preventing epidemic disease. There were also numerous expositions in newspapers and elsewhere during 1853/4 which acknowledged the primary role of material factors and predisposing conditions in causing cholera, so reducing and distancing supernatural control over epidemic disease [21].

These developments in perceptions of the role of providence in epidemic

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[20] Gilbert, The Making of Post-Christian Britain, chapter 1.

[21] See Chapter 3.

cholera might appear to result from a closing of the "gaps" referred to by Gilbert but they were clearly not a response to actual advances in medical science. Although Snow's work in 1849 and 1854 did in fact establish the mode of communication of cholera, its significance was not widely appreciated by the medical profession nor the public at large until considerably later. A physical demonstration of the presence of a water-borne infecting organism was not made until 1882. Objectively, there were no real advances in treatment or prevention until after the third epidemic, but the varying responses before then show that this was not the subjective impression of contemporary observers. Perceptions of the effectiveness of sanitary and other precautionary measures fluctuated throughout this period, but by the third epidemic, confidence in society's power to control this disease was more widespread and secure. It is clear that "gaps" in human understanding and control over the environment have to be seen in terms of contemporary viewpoints rather than with the benefit of historical hindsight.

In assessing the relevance of "gaps" in understanding and control to secularization, any divergence between responses by different social groups is clearly of interest. Religious attitudes would be expected to be affected differentially in a society in which varying rates of social and economic change were experienced by different classes. The relative lack of a religious element in the response of the lowest social classes is significant, and does not support the thesis that religion is the resort of those most deprived of control over their fate. The present findings suggest that experience of helplessness and insecurity encouraged a more fatalistic attitude which precluded expectations of intervention, benevolent or otherwise, while images of divine intervention were predominantly a feature of the middle class response. In his study of the first epidemic, Morris attempted to relate responses to cholera to social status and constitutional power, and observed that the image of an all-powerful angry God was especially meaningful to the powerless [22]. While this is not supported by domestic mission material surveyed over the longer period of this study, his observation that evangelicalism was an important determinant of perceptions of cholera in 1832 has

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[22] Morris, Cholera 1832 p.152.

been borne out in each of the three epidemics studied here.

In view of the medical profession's key role in influencing attitudes of the educated classes in this area, it would be especially useful to be able to monitor developments in doctors' religious views during the period of the three epidemics. Unfortunately, the sporadic nature of the medical source material did not allow this, though in the case of a few individuals, notably Peyton Blakiston, changes in attitude over a longer period (which included the publication of Origin of Species) did emerge. Generally however, there was little indication that doctors' perceptions of how cholera fitted into a wider cosmic order underwent significant development during these decades. Assumptions of a harmonious universe, maintained by a general providential order, continued to shape the views of those who made any religious allusion to cholera. Perhaps this reflects a generational effect on the views of more senior doctors at this time who had experienced a Paley-based education earlier in the century.

One of the more surprising findings of these surveys of cholera comment was the lack of references to Malthus. The earlier perceptions of cholera, as a disease of poverty and overcrowding, might be expected to have made a connection between the epidemic and the issue of population control inevitable. The absence of Malthus is also at odds with Young's assessment of the importance of Malthusian ideas during the first half of the nineteenth century, when his impact is compared with that of Freud a century later [23]. One explanation is that in the case of sanitary campaigners at least, there may have been a conscious attempt to exclude any unfashionably pessimistic associations from their promotion of health. They may have feared that popular support for the movement would be forfeited if expectations of social progress came to be seen as unrealistically optimistic. It is not, however, merely the absence of a view of cholera as potential reducer of surplus population which is surprising. There is also no overt evidence of the influence of more general Malthusian ideas on the place of man in the cosmos. According to Young, the influence of Malthus permeated the fields of science, natural theology, political and economic thought in the first half of the

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[23] Young, "Malthus and the Evolutionists" (1969) p.109-45.

century, and "provided the essential change of perspective for putting man into nature once and for all" some decades before Darwinian evolution eradicated the distinction between man and animals. The images of man's place in a providential universe conveyed in most of the responses to cholera show little sign of this transformation during the mid-century years. Further work is needed to explore the apparent failure of a supposedly dominant idea to influence contemporary thought in an area of such potential relevance as the midcentury cholera epidemics.

Cholera affected mid-nineteenth century society at a number of different levels, and so provoked a range of responses - practical, medical, political, intellectual, moral and spiritual. The rationale underlying the study of the history of ideas includes the assumption that ideas can have their own dynamic; they evolve in the minds of individuals and have an effect upon society to some extent independent of, though constrained by, social and economic forces. To follow the many strands generated by a phenomenon as multi-faceted as cholera would require other perspectives such as those of social and general history and economics. Adopting the approach of the history of ideas, this study has focused on an idea that was central to the religious view of nineteenth-century English society, and has attempted to trace its development during the twenty-four years of the cholera epidemics.

One of the premises of this research was that the difference between a religious and a secular society is revealed by the nature of world views held by individual members, rather than by the regularity or otherwise of church attendance and outward observance of religious rituals. To understand the process of change whereby a society becomes more secular it is therefore necessary to probe individual perceptions of the world. My hypothesis was that exploration of varying conceptions of providence would provide a means of assessing change in religious belief, the avowed aim, if not the practice, of many sociologists and historians in secularization research.

Detailed findings from different groups in society have been summarized in the foregoing sections. In essence the results have vindicated the use of the concept of providence to explore religious consciousness, and have confirmed that the mid-nineteenth century was a critical period for religious change. The changing

interpretations of cholera that were revealed seemed to illustrate the complex interaction between medical and sanitary ideas on the one hand, and moral and providential attitudes on the other. We also saw the effect of rising and declining mortality rates upon religious responses. It was clear that although social, political and economic factors were powerful determinants of behaviour during the epidemics, an analysis of influential ideas in the prevailing climate of opinion gives greater explanatory power. At any one time there will be a continuum or spectrum of views held by individual members of society; longitudinal study, as exemplified here, has exposed shifts in emphasis as contrasting and/or complementary ideas develop or decline.

This study has been restricted to historical material from a Christian cultural setting at a time of particular social change, but it is interesting to speculate how the concept of providence might have wider relevance for a longer term study of secularization. Certainly providential ideas contributed to debate and controversies later in the nineteenth century, particularly after the publication of Darwin's work [24]. In late twentieth-century Britain the traditional idea of providence embodying connotations both of purpose and of divine paternal care is central to the explicit world-view of only a minority of people. Ideas of fate, destiny or predictability of fortune are more widespread, but seem to relate more closely to pervasive and essentially pagan ideas rather than to the Christian concept of providence. It is however possible to perceive an afterglow of providential modes of thought in the cosmic "purpose" implied in some contemporary speech and writing. Even in the language of science and its apologists, lapses into teleological forms of explanation can sometimes be discerned. Such persistence of a sense of "purpose" in the world would be compatible with Royle's perception of religion in present day Britain as existing in four varieties: institutional and non-institutional (residual) Christianity, non-Christian institutional religions, and "paganism", with the suggestion that while the two exclusively Christian sections are in decline, a continuing strand of "pagan" or non-specific "religiousness" persists [25].

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[24] Ellegard, Darwin and the General Reader (1958).

[25] Edward Royle, Modern Britain: a Social History 1750-1985, (1985), p.341.

Further exploration of the decline of the idea of providence from the time of cholera to the era of AIDS and the thermonuclear bomb may well illuminate aspects of fundamental human psychology as much as, or more than, religious history.





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## Appendix B

### Cholera Sermons in *The Pulpit*

	Clergyman	Date of Delivery	
Volume 18	John Scott	22 December	1831
	Thomas Page	29 December	1831
Volume 19	Baptist Noel	21 March	1832
	Edward Maltby	21 March	1832
	Charles Blomfield	21 March	1832
	Reverend Grey	21 March	1832
	Reverend Smith	21 March	1832
	W B James	21 March	1832
Volume 20	Edward Irving	18 July	1832
Volume 54	Edward Thompson	15 October	1848
Volume 56	James Ralph	19 August	1849
	M V Villiers	16 September	1849
	Daniel Moore	19 September	1849
	George Fisk	19 September	1849
	Thomas Dale	23 September	1849
	Thomas Dale	23 September	1849 pm
	Robert Bickersteth	19 September	1849
	Robert Bickersteth	19 September	1849 pm
	J Jessop	16 September	1849
	Francis Statham	16 September	1849
	Henry Hollis	16 September	1849
	William Jay	28 September	1849
	James Williams	3 October	1849
	G S Drew	23 September	1849
	Joseph Brown	19 September	1849
	George Hall	15 November	1849
	Baptist Noel	15 November	1849
	Daniel Moore	15 November	1849
	D F Jarman	15 November	1849
	Robert Bickersteth	15 November	1849
	John Jessop	15 November	1849
	W C le Breton	15 November	1849
	Francis Statham	15 November	1849
William Jay	15 November	1849	
Volume 64	William Fisher	10 October	1849
	Montagu Villers	18 September	1853
	William Curling	5 October	1853
Volume 66	L M Humbert	14 September	1854
	T E Thoresby	12 September	1854

## Appendix C

### Bodleian 1849 Sermons:1849(1971-4)

#### Volume 1 A-G

W J E Bennett	St Paul's Knightbridge	Trinity XIII	1849
W J E Bennett	St Paul's Knightbridge	Trinity XIII	1849
William Braithwaite	Bideford	28 September	1849
William Buckland	Westminster	15 November	1849
J W Buckley	Brighton	15 November	1849
J W Buckley	Brighton	15 November	1849 pm
Robert Considine		31 December	1848
John Cumming		21 September	1849
John Cumming		21 September	1849 pm
R I Gould			
R I Gould			
R I Gould			

#### Volume 2 H-Me

D F Jarman	Bedford Chapel		
James M'Letchie	Edinburgh	18 October	1849

#### Volume 3 Mi-Sm

W H Mountain	Hampstead	16 September	1849
Charles Parsons Reichel	Dublin	15 November	1849
George C Rowden	Mortlake		
George C Rowden	Mortlake		
George C Rowden			
George Salmon		15 November	1849
Frederick Smith	Taunton	2 December	1849

#### Volume 4 St-W

Benjamin Street	Grantham	Trinity XV	1849
Benjamin Street	Grantham	15 November	1849
Francis Thornburgh	Kennington	19 September	1849
William Gowan Todd	Bristol	25 September	1849
L Tuttiet	Silverton	19 September	1849
J R Woodford	Lower Easton	25 September	1849

#### Other Bodleian Sermon collections

Sermons do not have a single identifying class mark in the Bodleian catalogue; however, by searching the hand lists for different accession periods, it was possible to identify a number of sermon collections for the relevant (cholera) years. Most of the sermons used in this study are shelved under the following class marks:

100, 100 e1065, 100 e1352, 100 f430, 100 i25, 100 i29, 100 i31,  
100 i62, 100 i79, 1007, 1330.

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To obtain through legislative enactments remedies for the evils which result from the present imperfect sanitary condition of the Metropolis, more particularly those arising from the condition of the dwellings of the labouring population, the non-removal of refuse, the prevalence of public and private nuisances, the unrestricted toleration of noxious trades and manufactures, the defective water supply, the surcharged state of the grave-yards, and from other deleterious agencies.

Aid may be rendered to the Association:—

1. By promoting the formation of Branch Associations in the various Parishes and Districts of the Metropolis.
2. By petitioning the Legislature.
3. By spreading abroad, by Lectures and otherwise, a knowledge of the advantages which will be conferred on society through efficient Health Laws.
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