In order to place the present discussion in context, it must be emphasised that *The Church of England in Industrialising Society: the Lancashire Parish of Whalley in the Eighteenth Century* delivers a very different verdict on the Church of England in industrialising Lancashire from that which was reached by Dr Smith in *Religion in Industrial Society: Oldham and Saddleworth 1740–1865*, that ‘more optimistic account of eighteenth century Anglicanism in northern England’ to which he alludes and which largely informs his review. *Religion in Industrial Society* traces the vitality of religious life in nineteenth-century Oldham and Saddleworth to certain robust virtues possessed by the Church of England in that locality in the period 1730–1830. However, Smith’s perspective is somewhat undermined by the partial scope of his research for the period prior to 1800. In stressing the extent of local church building, the activities of local musical societies and the commitment and activism of the local (often evangelical) clergy in this period, Smith drew primarily on parish and personal papers and on nineteenth-century statistics relating to church accommodation. However, he did little more than scratch the surface of the rich archival material held by Chester Record Office for the period up to 1800. Consequently, a number of key issues are not examined in *Religion in Industrial Society*. Smith’s book makes no attempt to investigate the role of the church courts in local society or the place of religion in local politics, notwithstanding the bitter politico-religious climate of early- and mid-eighteenth-century Lancashire. Furthermore, it dispenses with any discussion of tithing practices, the structures of church patronage or the place and fate of parochial charities. The book also admits to having little to offer with reference to what the inhabitants of Oldham and Saddleworth actually believed at this time and how far their beliefs corresponded with Anglican orthodoxy. (1) Finally, and despite the importance of this evidence for his conclusions, Smith offered no data as to prevailing patterns of church attendance at any point during the eighteenth century. The earliest visitation material to which he refers dates from 1778 but seems to yield nothing under this head. In fact, this information remained ‘rather sketchy’ as late as the mid-1820s. (2) Fairly stated, Smith’s research engaged only partially with the structures, law and culture of eighteenth-century Anglicanism. Nevertheless, and on the basis of the other evidence he marshalled, Smith pronounced that ‘Judged by almost any standards, the “unreformed” Establishment of Oldham and Saddleworth was an impressive institution’. (3) Apart from the different geographical settings and chronology of our studies, the scope of our inquiries and the very different range of sources used to inform them accounts for why our emphases and conclusions are so radically different.

For clarity’s sake, I will accept Smith’s summary of my chapters as accurate and fair and will deal with his other comments as they arise. In his introductory remarks, Smith places my book in the wider context of ‘the debate between “optimistic” and “pessimistic” historians of the eighteenth-century Church of England that was characteristic of the late 1980s and early 1990s’. Whilst I acknowledge that my book was subject to prolonged delays in publication, I am not at all persuaded that time has been called on this long-running debate. Whilst the emphasis may have shifted to a more dispassionate mapping of the fortunes of the established church in the various corners of England and Wales (a movement symbolised by Jeremy Gregory and Jeffrey Chamberlain’s collection of essays *The National Church in Local Perspective: the Church of England and the Regions, 1660–1800*) the debate is very much present in this collection. (4) In any case, the question of the Church of England’s performance at a local level remains vital in accounting for the evident weakening of its overall position in English and Welsh society from the 1790s. Although the debate between the ‘optimistic’ majority and ‘pessimistic’ minority may seem to bedevil the historiography of the eighteenth-century church, their often bruising dialogue (of which this exchange is inevitably a part) has been crucial in locating the strengths and weaknesses of the Church of England on the ground. Furthermore, and despite
impressions to the contrary, historians are not necessarily in thrall to ‘essentially Victorian benchmarks’ in assessing the performance of the established church in the eighteenth century. The Church of England’s ‘performance indicators’ (e.g. the state of local schools and parish charities, levels of church attendance and participation in Holy Communion, the condition of parish churches and chapels, the growth or decline of dissentient minorities etc.) were quite clear to contemporaries and they were embodied in visitation inquiries from their period. In the light of this fact, the clergy of the parish of Whalley at the turn of the nineteenth century did not need to share the pastoral standards and concerns of later Evangelicals or Tractarians in order to apprehend that much was amiss in their huge and populous parish.

Let us move on to address Dr Smith’s reservations. Clearly, he is concerned that my book renders a ‘minimalist account’ of alternative points of view, by which he seems to mean those advanced in Religion in Industrial Society. Leaving aside the universal constraints of restrictions and priorities imposed by publishers’ word limits, I would emphasise that the example which he cites occurs in the concluding paragraph of my book and that the issues which I mention there are discussed more fully in earlier chapters (pp. 5, 36, 39–40, 163, 173). At this point, Smith also raises the question of church music, alluding to ‘popular involvement with the church’ via ‘the provision of music’, a subject which was omitted from my book for the reason that there is no local evidence for it. However, I must acknowledge my debt to him in pointing out Roger Elbourne’s study Music and Tradition in Early Industrial Lancashire. Elbourne’s book focuses on the activities of a musical society in Rossendale, one known as the Larks of Dean. However, far from being linked with the Church of England, this society was founded by a Baptist minister around the middle of the eighteenth century and was chiefly composed of local Baptists who ‘gloried in their Nonconformist principles and simple Gospel faith’. (5) In the light of this (and two fleeting allusions to musical performances in Burnley and Haslingden chapels during the first quarter of the nineteenth century) I see no reason to reconsider my view as to the waning state of popular Anglicanism in the parish of Whalley towards the end of the eighteenth century. In fact, Elbourne’s book would seem to confirm the enterprise and initiative of the church’s Dissenting rivals.

Dr Smith also takes issue with what he describes as ‘an apparent tendency to reductionism’, a tendency which seems to be present in my appraisals of ‘the middle-class and gentry supporters of the church’. Here, Smith rather presupposes the existence of a good measure of disinterested generosity among them. Once again, however, this is far from evident in the local sources. As my study demonstrates, certain gestures of public-spiritedness (such as the casting and hanging of new bells) were severely hampered by the complexities of raising church rates in Whalley’s multi-settlement chaplries. However, and quite apart from the delicacy and intricacies of the rating system, it does not appear that many of the better sort actually aspired to be disinterested patrons of ecclesiastical building projects. It may be, of course, that their priorities lay elsewhere, such as in supporting local grammar and charity schools. Nevertheless, even here their support was less than munificent, with one subscription for Padiham school in the mid-eighteenth century even complaining ‘That Charity in this Country was as Cold as the Climate’ (p. 90). Furthermore, the changing nature and patterns of contemporary philanthropy (which were evident nationally as well as locally), the rising costs of poor relief in the parish and even the needs of local commerce may well have meant that church extension was accorded a low priority. In the chapelry of Colne, for example, where population more than trebled between 1720 and 1800, the principal inhabitants were more inclined to invest in a new workhouse and in a new market hall than to enlarge or adorn their church for public benefit (p. 40). Similarly, although the chapel of Padiham was rebuilt in the 1760s, this was done, as Thomas Whitaker sourly noted, ‘with an attention to economy not very laudable among so opulent a body of parishioners’. (6) Smith’s example of the rebuilding of the chapel at Holme in 1788 does little to alter this picture. In fact, in the absence of any information to show who the subscribers to this project were or how many were involved, it is not evident that this was a local initiative. (7) What is much clearer, however, is that on the basis of the evidence available we cannot assert that local members of the gentry or of the middling sort were conspicuously generous or self-sacrificing in their attitudes to the fabric and fittings of local chapels.

The breadth and direction of Dr Smith’s engagement with eighteenth-century sources is most evident from his comments on my use of church court material. This evidence, he asserts, is more likely to reflect ‘the
pathology of parochial life rather than its normal condition’. Again, however, this tends to assume the underlying tranquillity of contemporary parish life. Despite this assumption, it would probably be more realistic to acknowledge that communal life in eighteenth-century England was inevitably charged with tensions relating to personal rights, standing and reputation, only some of which issued in disputes which came before the ecclesiastical courts (such cases were, as I emphasise, almost prohibitively expensive for the private litigant). Smith’s further insistence that disputes over appropriated seating in churches were not necessarily indicative of ‘general attitudes to the use of pews, especially when their owners were absent’ is rather beguiling. This argument is drawn from an inconclusive point made in Religion in Industrial Society. Here, Smith claims that pew owners were disposed to take a relaxed and generous view of the use of their seats by the poor. However, the evidence he cites in support of this claim concerns seating in relatively new and commodious chapels and dates from the 1820s. Furthermore, its strength is rather diluted by his later admission that, even in such a setting, these attitudes could be conspicuously absent as late as the 1840s. (8) However, Smith clearly assumes that significant numbers of pew owners in the parish of Whalley would have been inclined to generosity. Whilst this is entirely speculative, it also runs against the grain of a large body of evidence which shows that the naves of Whalley’s ancient churches were very much contested space. Whereas seats were effectively purchased by individuals in the new chapels of Oldham and Saddleworth, in the much older chapels of Whalley ownership of seats was vested in specific properties and complicated by important and emotive questions of customary right, or (as it could be legally interpreted) on the rights bestowed by at least forty years’ usage (p. 103). Because Whalley saw only one new church built in this period, it seems inevitable that church seating would prove to be a more contentious and problematic issue in the medieval and Tudor fabrics of the parish of Whalley than it was in the Georgian chapels of Oldham and Saddleworth.

After raising these caveats, Smith presents a rather strange argument, namely that I have attached disproportionate weight to the clergymen who found themselves in serious trouble with their parishioners (and with the ecclesiastical authorities) in the period of this study. Whilst he is right to note that the eleven individuals in question made their mark on the historical record to a greater extent than many of their peers, Smith fails to register my point that a previous study of the eighteenth-century Church of England in the whole of Lancashire identified only two cases of ‘truly notorious’ clergy. (9) Furthermore, Smith’s point that 88.5 per cent of the parochial clergy appeared to behave themselves is vitiated by the provisional nature of the figures on which this statistic is based and, more importantly, by his failure to grasp the significance of clerical scandal at this time. As I state quite explicitly, the eleven cases I identify are a minimum estimate – further scrutiny of a whole tranche of visitation court records may well throw up additional examples (p. 184). Furthermore, it seems odd to argue that disproportionate weight has been attached to these individuals when (as today’s Catholic Church knows to its cost) cases of clerical misconduct exert a disproportionate impact by their very nature. In a recent study of the Church of England in post-Restoration Wiltshire, Donald Spaeth emphasised the damaging consequences of clerical misbehaviour for relations between the clergy and the laity at this time (The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners, 1660–1740, Cambridge, 2000). However, contemporary bishops of Chester were also acutely aware of the high standards of behaviour which were imposed upon the Anglican clergy by the Prayer Book ordinals, by canon law and by lay expectation. Not only was adherence to these standards repeatedly urged upon the clergy in their visitation charges but the anxiety of the diocesan authorities is reflected in the telling sentence passed by the bishop’s court upon one of Whalley’s worst clerical delinquents, his adultery being described as ‘true Publick & Notorious in and throughout the Chapelry of Colne… and other places adjacent’ (p. 187).

Nowhere, however, is Smith’s nineteenth-century approach to the eighteenth-century church clearer than in his preoccupation with church accommodation and in his desire to see statistics for church seating, that ‘potentially quantifiable evidence’ which, he argues, would have added greater rigour to this study. In terms of his own work, Smith accords the provision of seating a very high priority. However, providing seats and filling them are very different propositions and, even if such statistics could be extrapolated from contemporary seating plans (which, significantly, indicate the ownership of pews rather than their capacity) it would not alter the fact that Smith’s perspective is much too partial. Whilst there certainly seems to have been pressure on church accommodation in the parish of Whalley during the eighteenth century, this was
only one of the more obvious signs that the Church of England was losing its grip. Another indicator was the church’s evident failure to educate a growing population. To this can be added its failure to sustain traditional models of charity, its failure to inoculate its adherents against the errors of ‘superstition’, its failure to provide an adequate supply of competent clergy, its failure to secure the laity’s cooperation with its correction courts and, finally, its failure to sustain rush-bearings, parish feasts and other communal demonstrations of attachment to the established church.

All of these long-term trends are spelled out in the conclusion of my book, which highlights the deteriorating situation in the parish as revealed by the episcopal visitations of 1778 and 1804, the most complete sets of visitation data available for the parish in this period. My conclusion, it must be emphasised, presents a picture of long-term and aggregate decline. However, Smith queries the value of non-attendance figures as evidence for the church’s worsening plight, singling out the case of the chapelry of Downham (Whalley’s smallest and least populous chapelry) in 1778. In Downham’s case, Smith argues, its element of habitual non-attenders was numerically insignificant. Furthermore, and in the absence of evidence for earlier years, he posits that church attendance at Downham may well have improved over the course of the century. However, this is to ignore his own point as to the imprecision of these figures. For example, the number in question may well refer to householders, which could mean that the overall number of habitual non-attenders was several times greater. However one might speculate upon the mathematics, the number of those who appeared to disregard religion was significant enough to draw comment. More significant still is the fact that these were ‘the most wretched’ of Downham’s inhabitants, a theme which runs through the returns of 1778 for the parish as a whole. The suggestion that, in the absence of earlier figures, church attendance at Downham may have increased has to be judged against what we do know about the chapelry at this time. As my study shows, charitable doles had fallen into abeyance (a common pattern which must account in part for the widespread alienation of the very poor), the church’s power to regulate public morality through its correction courts had evaporated and the inhabitants of Downham took so much pride in the fabric of their church that, ‘in Order to keep off Expence from themselves’ they would suffer ‘any Person, from any Place, who will pay two Shillings extra for Burial Fees, to be buried in the Chapel’ notwithstanding the damage inflicted on its fabric (pp. 77, 97–132, 136). Smith is, however, clearly anxious to tug at the strand of evidence relating to non-attendance figures and he asserts that there is an absence of data to indicate ‘substantial disaffection to the church’ prior to 1804, an argument which renders my argument ‘unsustainable’. Here I would simply point him to the further evidence supplied by the growth of Methodism in the parish prior to 1778.

Whilst Smith is right to argue that eighteenth-century Methodism can be viewed as ‘a particularly vital form of lay Anglicanism’, such an interpretation is highly problematic and is open to major qualification. Methodism was a diverse and amorphous movement, it appealed to Dissenters as well as to Anglicans and there were clear and longstanding differences among the various Methodist connexions as to their relations with the established church. Clearly, Methodism in the parish of Whalley did not spring from the bosom of the Church of England. Far from being nurtured by a local Venn, Walker or Newton, the evidence indicates that the relationship between popular evangelicalism and the clergy in the parish of Whalley was generally (although not invariably) oppositional. Whilst the Methodists of Downham attended the services of the Church of England in 1804, their brethren in Churchkirk were gaining recruits by virtue of ‘their constant Strain of abusing the Minister of the established Church and the Government’ (p. 196). However, ever since its advent in the parish, Methodism had posed problems for the church, not least because it had been planted and cultivated by highly exceptionable outsiders. Besides John Wesley himself, these included William Grimshaw (the controversial curate of Haworth), John Bennet (a Presbyterian), William Darney (a Scottish Presbyterian) and Benjamin Ingham (a clergyman and crypto-Moravian who defected from the Church of England in 1749). Due to the incursions of Methodist itinerants, the chapelyes of the Forest of Pendle were convulsed by anti-Methodist rioting in 1748, riots which led to the registration of some Methodist meetings under the Toleration Act. (10) With Methodism’s separatist colours in evidence from an early date, the parish clergy (who had condoned and even led the riots of 1748) almost invariably disdained any association with Methodism, abhorring its appeal to popular superstition as well as its sectarian tendencies. Whilst Methodists were harassed in Padiham as late as 1777 (p. 34), it was ironic that the only curate who evinced a
positive disposition towards Methodism prior to 1778 was an alcoholic (p. 173). Despite his evangelical leanings, even Thomas Whitaker placed obedience and conformity to the Church of England above all else, condemning ‘the sin of schism’ and anything which savoured of ‘self-will and separation’ (11). In view of this evidence, and however ‘perverse’ this may seem to Smith, it would be absurd to argue that the existence of hundreds of Methodists in the parish by 1778 was indicative of the hidden merits of the Church of England.

Finally, Smith suggests that comparison of the visitation returns of 1778 and 1804 could show that, far from being a casualty of its long-term ailments, the Church of England was simply ‘overwhelmed late in the century by a series of large-scale changes, especially in demography’. Whilst this conclusion may sound reassuringly familiar to Smith, it does not stand close scrutiny. The decline of parochial charities and the demise of the correction courts was well advanced long before Bishop Porteus’s visitation of 1778 and the surge in population which characterised the last quarter of the eighteenth century (p. 10). Rush-bearing at the parish church ceased in the 1770s, the deficiencies of the local clergy were so long-term as to be historic and Methodism had prospered since the 1740s, its growth defying the strident opposition of the clergy. In view of all this, the visitation returns of 1778 and 1804 seem to reflect not so much ‘an adequate or even “successful” establishment’ being swamped by a growing population, but inevitable and accelerating defections from an institution which had become increasingly marginal to the lives of many of its members.

These will not be the last salvoes to be fired at each other by ‘pessimistic’ and ‘optimistic’ historians of the eighteenth-century Church of England. Whilst it is clear that Smith thinks I take an unduly negative view of that institution, I would regard his perspective as veering towards the Panglossian. However, besides questions of interpretation of evidence, it is clear that our evidential bases are very different and that we treat the eighteenth century in contrasting ways. Whereas Smith has sought to identify the roots of a vigorous nineteenth-century religious culture in selected highlights of eighteenth-century church life, I have sought to view it more broadly and in the context of its own time. Rather than peer at the eighteenth-century church from the perspective and statistical fastnesses of the succeeding century, I would emphasise the profound extent to which its role and structures in post-Toleration England were shaped and encumbered by the inheritance of previous centuries.

As Mark Goldie has stressed in a recent review article, eighteenth-century England was indeed ‘a world of voluntary Anglicans’. In the light of this fact, and reflecting the upbeat mood of the prevailing historiography, Goldie called for renewed study of the SPCK, the SRM, the Sunday school movement and other manifestations of voluntary and associational endeavour on behalf of the Church of England. (12) This manifesto will, of course, have ‘optimists’ champing at the bit. However, Goldie’s optimism led him to overlook a vital aspect of this picture; one, indeed, which fuelled a great deal of this endeavour. After the Toleration Act, Anglicans were free to detach themselves from vital aspects of church life and even to disengage from it altogether. Whilst often holding fast to beliefs which the Church of England had long found objectionable, they could stay away from church on the Sabbath and flout the church’s correction courts with growing impunity. More subtly, they could regard the parish church and its parish charities as less central to communal life and as less deserving of their moral and material support. As my study demonstrates, in the large, ill-served and somewhat ramshackle parish of Whalley, the Church of England showed that it was ill equipped to teach, regulate, relieve and even entertain a rapidly growing population over the course of the eighteenth century. In the changed circumstances of post-Toleration England, this meant that an increasing number of its parishioners would come to regard the church with apathy or seek the fellowship of its more dynamic local rivals.

Notes


2. Smith, p. 61.


7. Whitaker, i, xiv.

8. Smith, pp. 37–8, 72.


11. Whitaker, ii, 251 footnote.


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