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‘As to the article of business, what is a religious man not prepared for, that he can be called to?’: Faith, work and business in northern English towns

Despite this confident assertion by the clergyman, Richard Cecil in 1793, with a few notable exceptions, economic, business and urban historians of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries tend to overlook religious faith. Though recent scholarship by historians of religion and the supernatural has suggested the continued importance of religion and other forms of belief amongst lay people during this period, most historical studies assume that urban centres witnessed a process of religious decline between 1740 and 1830: a symptom of ‘modernity’ that was the product of industrialisation, urbanisation and Enlightenment thinking. This is especially true of those urban centres such as Manchester and Leeds that were fastest growing and changed most rapidly, which have been readily associated with both the industrial revolution and the rise of secular society.

Yet business virtues were commonly seen in a firmly religious framework throughout this period. Though articles of faith concerning work and business have been described by historians as influencing the conduct of Quakers in particular, similar considerations were also apparent amongst those of other dissenting sects prominent in north-west towns, such as Presbyterians, Methodists and Unitarians, as well as Anglicans. Indeed, all Christians were exhorted to uphold their duty to labour, whilst the requirement to ensure fair dealing and honesty was not unique to Quakerism. This paper explores how ordinary workers and small business owners from a broad range of denominational groups conceptualised their own daily labours in relation to religion. By drawing on evidence in ego-documents such as letters and diaries, it examines how piety influenced the experience and conduct of work and business in northern English towns. The paper will also suggest that faith and religious practice continued to be central to conceptions of ‘credit’ into the nineteenth century.

This paper is a product of the AHRC-funded ‘Faith in the Town: Lay religion, urbanisation and industrialisation in England, 1740-1830’ project, based at the Universities of Manchester and Nottingham. Kate Gibson, who is part of the project team, is also proposing a paper for the conference.