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‘Faith and care work in northern English towns, 1760-1830’

This paper investigates the relationship between religious faith and care work among individuals living in rapidly industrialising towns in Northern England between 1740 and 1830. Existing scholarship on links between work and faith, by historians such as Matthew Kadane and Jane Garnett, have typically focused on the beliefs of male heads of family firms and successful tradesmen, overlooking the experience of lower-status employees, and women in particular. Time-use studies, such as that by Hans-Joachim Voth, have suggested that women were more likely to combine paid work with unpaid domestic or caring responsibilities, but have focused primarily on the effect of this on their leisure time and economic status, rather than any other aspect of their lives, such as religion. Historians of religion have conceptualised care within ideals of motherhood, not work, and have argued that it was seen by women as a fulfilling opportunity to practice their faith. This paper combines this scholarship with recent economic histories of care work, to suggest that care work was seen within the same framework of religious virtues (such as diligence and honesty) that were applied to commercial and manufacturing occupations in this period. Using correspondence and life-writing produced by individuals living in Northern English towns, including servants, factory workers, and the wives of middling traders and professionals, it also argues that care responsibilities were a major impediment to women’s ability to practice their faith, particularly for poorer women who could not rely on servants’ labour. More widely, it demonstrates that faith remained a significant aspect of individuals’ lives during a period of intense economic change. Industrialisation and urbanisation presented both challenges and opportunities for the practice of faith, but these were experienced unevenly according to gender and socio-economic status. Analysis of caring responsibilities as a form of work provides crucial detailed evidence of these wider developments.