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## A Sinful Nation

1832

MANY STUDIES HAVE ELABORATED the medical history of the epidemics and a few, like R. J. Morris's, trace some of the social impact. However, very little attention has been paid to the religious response or the epidemic's political uses in the franchise reform debates, related and very important aspects of the cholera's social and political impact on public debate for many years to come. This and the following two chapters examine how cholera was taken up by various interest groups and immediately discursively wedded to the other major public concern of the time: the debates surrounding the 1832 Reform Bill. The Reform Bill, hotly contested, aimed to expand the franchise to include some male members of the middle class and also to reform the electoral system, eliminating rotten boroughs and the bribing of electors. Coming on the heels of religious reform bills that increased tolerance of Catholics and dissenters and amid fears of revolution, the Reform Bill seemed to some to herald the dissolution of society and to others, the coming of a just and perfect state. The apparent volatility of society and its institutions was linked in the press to the mysterious threat of the new illness.

### CHOLERA AND THE CHURCH IN 1832

In a time of rapid development of the professions and concomitant specialization, of challenges to existing religious beliefs and renegotiation of political and class oppositions, the arrival of the cholera meant the commencement

of a struggle over the location and sources of the authority to define its meanings.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in this period, every political question (as cholera rapidly came to be defined) was debated also as a religious question; as historian Eileen Groth Lyon points out, conservatives, radicals, and everyone in between had their own take on the relevance of the scripture to current conflicts (77). However, such questions now invited the input of a new kind of more secular expert as well. This struggle overlapped with, and sometimes was contained within, other struggles of longer standing, but epidemics, like other dramatic public events, have a way of forcing such disputes to crisis. In official and unofficial bulletins, pamphlets, reports, sermons, and articles, Anglican clergy and the emerging medical profession struggled over the right to publicly interpret the social meanings of cholera.<sup>2</sup> This conflict over social authority exposes the ways in which discourses of national identity were being mobilized throughout the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of the period, a partial redrawing of the boundaries between the two “camps,” but also a partial erosion of those boundaries occurs; the “disaggregation of domains” of knowledge and authority, as theorist Mary Poovey elaborates, is neither a simple nor linear process.

In the early days of the first (1832) epidemic, cholera was believed to be the special scourge of the impious and dissolute. Cholera would strike those who scorned the Sabbath, who drank and blasphemed, and who mocked the illness as the expression of God’s anger (the literature abounds with examples of people who laugh at the cholera—often, not coincidentally, in pubs—and are stricken “that very night!”). The poor were hardest hit, thus confirming the general perception that poverty was the result of sin, and a kind of sin itself. Clergy and medics both shaped public perception of the epidemic: the clergy as the official and state-sanctioned arbiter of morality and the medics as part of an emerging area of public administration officially represented by hastily thrown together “boards of health,” delegated by the Privy Council mid-epidemic, with uncertain powers and even more limited credibility.

Additionally, the boards and those clergy who tried to assist them faced a recalcitrant public in the midst of reform agitation, sceptical of the existence of cholera as a disease and inclined to lump together clergy and medical authorities with Tory and capitalist interests. No one has undertaken to look very specifically at the clerical reaction to the epidemic, especially in published sermons. However, an impressive number of sermons were published in response to the epidemic, which had a wide audience and a powerful, even definitive impact on how the issues of cholera and public health were framed. Close examination suggests that there were specific historical and political reasons that conservative, pro-establishment Anglican churchmen, who authored the majority of these sermons, reacted to cholera in the way they did—that is, to declare cholera in Britain a national emergency brought on by

national sin (when it was, after all, a world pandemic).<sup>3</sup> This framing of the cholera reflected specific challenges to the authority of the church in this period, including political but also religious reform, and the emerging power of a newly institutionalized scientific discourse. In short, the articulation of the cholera epidemic as public discourse had as much or more to do with the vicissitudes of a particular historical moment as with the prevailing intellectual understanding of disease.

Careful examination of these materials, not only in their individual political contexts, but in dialogue with each other, shows how cholera became a foundational political issue itself. It contributed to the targeting of public health in what came to be called the "Condition of England" question, in the struggle of the lower classes for inclusion in the national body, indeed, in the very definition and identification of nation with a middle-class, clean, British body, which, by the 1850s, would become racialized as specifically white and English. It did so, in part, because vocal pro-establishment churchmen (that is, those opposed to any separation between the church and the state, who saw the church as the guide of the state rather than its subordinate) used cholera as a platform for their identification of the church as the nation's teacher in such a way as to set the terms for the debate throughout different interest groups. For the remainder of the period, charitable, housing, and labor reform would focus on health, above all other issues, as that which bound the "two nations" into a single body through a communicative medium of disease. The confluence of discourses emerging from the church crisis and reform with the chronological accident of the cholera epidemic led to specific discursive moves on the part of church, state, medical authorities, and labor organizations. In turn, these moves caused images and metaphors particular to the circumstances of the first cholera epidemic to gain an important, even constitutive, force in the discourse of the national body as it emerged over the next four decades.

Before the cholera epidemic became a public issue, the crisis of reform had already inspired calls for a collective fast emphasizing diminishing national unity. The "crisis" had not only to do with the first Reform Bill *per se*, but with the momentous events of the late 1820s that had preceded it and were representative of the same spirit, especially the elimination of Catholic disabilities and the repeal of the Test and Corporations Acts.<sup>4</sup> These legislative actions enabled some non-Anglican Christians (especially Catholics) to have more direct political representation and indeed, to hold public office. Since, as Linda Colley notes, the idea of Britain as a "nation" depended more on Protestantism than on, say, ethnicity, it is unsurprising that these changes were seen by many as an erosion of the integrity of national unity. Within the Church of England, establishmentarians indignantly prophesied doom.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most famous response was "National Apostasy," John Keble's 1833 Assize Sermon:

Omens and tokens of an Apostate Mind in a nation . . . [include a most alarming symptom:] the growing indifference, in which men indulge themselves, to other men's religious sentiments. Under the guise of charity and toleration we are come almost to this pass; that no difference, in matters of faith, is to disqualify for our approbation. . . . I do not speak of public measures only. . . . But I speak of the spirit which leads men to exult in every step of that kind; to congratulate one another on the supposed decay of what they call an exclusive system. . . . Is it not saying . . . "we will be as the heathen," the aliens to the Church of our Redeemer? (127–33)

This ill-intentioned "spirit which leads men" was the spirit of reform, which extended beyond the recognition of Irish Catholics to the recognition of £10 householders enfranchised in 1832.<sup>6</sup> Many of these were very likely to be dissenters, especially in the industrial North, the Midlands, and the West, where the Anglican Church was not as strong as in the agricultural South.<sup>7</sup> Much of Keble's sermon focuses on the church's loss of its privileged status and its legislative power, and this is specifically couched in a rhetoric of alienation—to become "as the heathens, the aliens" within one's own nation.

Keble's reference to charity is particularly charged. The charity and tolerance that had been urged in favor of Catholic emancipation was textually based on Corinthians 12, wherein the church is defined as a single body made of many members with differing talents and views. Charity is urged as the antidote to doctrinal and personal squabbling that will violate the body's unity. But for Keble, the body invoked was not that of Christianity broadly conceived, but of the Anglican Church per se. Many calls to unity, both those addressed to clergy and those addressed to congregations, emphasized this body metaphor, and identified it with the body of the nation—a body that itself was being rearticulated through reform. This body was clearly not only the Christian community, it was also the state that represented it. For Keble, supporting an established church, the church was coterminous with both nation and state. Keble worried that extending the body to encompass "alien" beliefs would shatter its unity.

The politically conservative secular community as well framed reform as a disaster of national proportions and as a degeneration of the social body. As early as February 15, 1831, well before the advent of cholera, the *Times* reported MP Spencer Perceval's parliamentary motion for a general fast: "The state of the country loudly called for a measure like his—that it was in a state of political and religious disorganization—that the elements of its constitution were hourly being loosened;— . . . corruption was showing its face, and the body corporate was diseased from head to foot." In fact, the motion was at this time withdrawn. However, when the cholera finally did arrive a year later, "a national day of fasting and humiliation" was finally declared in Parliament, legitimating the religious action as an affair of state.

Naturally, such an occasion invited reflection on the individual's relationship to the nation, particularly in terms of the rhetoric of the epidemic and its focus on the individual culpability of cholera victims. The official liturgy of the Church of England insisted on national guilt and sinfulness; in Hull, local clergy excerpted the prayer and printed it in a penny tract, along with a text that catechized the reader, who was assumed to be reluctant to admit to sin and had to be prodded to do so. Such fast days were declared in times of any national calamity, including war and famine; however, on no similar occasion in the period have I found an outpouring of literature as voluble and dramatic on the subject of national sin as this one.<sup>8</sup> Believing the church was facing spoliation, and according to some alarmists, disestablishment, many felt the church was in its most serious political crisis since the interregnum. Church of England conservatives were highly motivated to identify the church forcefully with the nation, and to emphasize its role as instructor to the people and interpreter of their collective experiences.<sup>9</sup>

The Church of England liturgy insisted on the guilt of the nation. Yet the public was also often told that the disease would only strike those *individuals* who were sinful and intemperate. By the end of the epidemic, there was some attempt to decriminalize the victims, or at least admit that not all cholera victims were drunkards and, in any case, must be treated as patients rather than reprobates. Still, the language wavered between a careful neutrality and blame. For example, Charles Gaselee and Alexander Tweedie, authors of *A Practical Treatise on the Cholera*, admit that after the first wave of epidemic, when "It fell principally, almost wholly, on the lower classes of society. . . . In June it returned; all parts of London, and most of the Suburbs, felt its influence: the city was severely visited; all ranks of life became affected . . . the assurances of the security of the affluent, have proved to be erroneous and futile" (2). However, the anonymous author of "Why Are You Afraid of the Cholera?" gives calm, technical medical directions, in the midst of which, apropos of nothing obvious, the author bursts out: "The greater part of those who have died of the cholera have been bad, dirty, drunken and idle people!" (By the Author . . . 8). The *Working Man's Companion*, published by the SDUK, temporized, "On the one hand, a large majority of persons who have died of cholera have been very poor and wretched, and disposed to disease by the weakness that poor living has occasioned. This is no time to remind any of them, poor people, that their poverty has come of their idleness, or that their poor diet might be better if they were not extravagant and not ignorant" (161). It goes on to warn its intended audience of mechanics and artisans, which is quite carefully separated from the population thus described, that *any* kind of intemperance could bring on the cholera—not just alcohol, but excessive eating, not eating enough, or eating too much of one kind of food. On the whole, the attitude of the English basically coincided with that of the French medic Amedee

Lefevre, whom George Rees, M.D., cites as an authority on the disease: “There is this peculiarity in the Cholera, it attacks the dissolute and the drunkard . . . it was observed to clear the towns it invaded [in Persia] of all such as . . . were a nuisance to society.” To which Rees adds, “Who can tell then what advantages may ultimately arise from that which we now so painfully anticipate? That which is now the object of our fears, may hereafter be the subject of our gratitude” (Rees 34–35).

It is hardly odd, then, that the clergy faced difficulties making their congregations feel responsible for and unified with the victims of the first epidemic. Clergyman James A. Taylor runs through a veritable catalog of sins, apparently hoping that every auditor would have felt guilty of *something*.

How does the nation at large profane the *Day* of the Lord, instead of *remembering* to “keep it holy!” How generally is it made a day of business, of feasting, of pleasure, of excess, of a double tide of sin! How is it desecrated by the issue of Newspapers, which, in righteous judgement for the national sin of permitting such a violation of God’s law, circulate principles of insubordination, immorality and vice! Are not shops opened and encouraged for the sale of avowed infidel publications: while the sabbath has its licensed lecturers in infidelity! How does whoredom pollute the land! How disgraceful to common decency is the state of our streets! How is the papacy . . . nationally cherished! While 800,000 of our fellow beings are still held in slavery! (12–13)

Taylor continues to list other possibilities: dissipation of the great, discontent of the lower orders with their own position, and drunkenness are added to the list of national sins. He then covers anything he might have forgotten, “These are things, with many others which might be named, which form a mass of increasing national guilt” (13). He concludes, “Lastly, forget not our guilty country. Individually, in your families, in your public assembly, most humbly confess before Almighty God the nation’s guilt and its worthiness to suffer” (Taylor 33).

In this fairly typical sermon, there is a clear concern with mediating between the units of subnational groups—the individual, the family, the public assembly—and the larger entity of nation. There is also the usual concern with non-Anglican religion (the “licensed lecturers in infidelity” are probably Catholics, as attack on the papacy is a strong theme in this sermon, though they might also simply be dissenters). Taylor suggests that sins in “public” spaces—“whoredom,” “the state of our streets,” “licensed lecturers,” and “Newspapers”—are more chargeable as national sins than crimes regularly committed in “private” spaces. Who is committing these sins is also not entirely clear: “permitting” the sale of newspapers is presumably the responsibility of government, but “drunkenness” is the sin of an individual, though augmented by its presence in public space.

Probably most clergy were less concerned with the theoretical issues of the individual's relationship to the nation than they were with impressing upon their flocks that such a connection surely existed. The local clergy of Newcastle-upon-Tyne put together a small pamphlet of which they distributed twenty thousand free copies. In it, they explain that all disease is sent by God in punishment of sin, and that many sins are committed by many daily, "But the question again returns, WHAT SIN SO PREVAILS IN THIS TOWN AND NEIGHBORHOOD AS TO BE CONSIDERED THE CAUSE OF THIS PESTILENCE?" ("An Affectionate Address" 3). The authors offer no clear answer to this question, instead offering anecdotes of sinners stricken by cholera. In this catalog, however, there is again a suggestion that public spectacle involves sin that "spreads" to spectators, much as the countenancing (and perhaps even reading) of newspapers in Taylor's text causes public culpability:

About noon on Christmas Day, (which was also the Holy Sabbath!) in the lower part of the Town and in Bottle Bank, such scenes of drunkenness and outrage were witnessed, as would be disgraceful in a heathen country. Men and women were staggering in a state of complete intoxication. Some were brawling and fighting, while crowds were collected as spectators to glory in their shame. The streets in this case were almost impassible. (5)

Cholera, Taylor emphasizes, struck the community that same night (5). National identity (set against the "heathen" country) is betrayed by the spectators who "glory" in the shame of their fellow subjects—though it might seem impossible to avoid stopping to witness such a spectacle, the streets being "impassible." In this and many other tracts or sermons relating to the national fast day, clergy returned again and again to the issue of national versus individual sin, suggesting a need to make sense of a relationship that was rather unclear to their audience, if not themselves.

Anglican clergy were thus placed in a peculiar position. While confirming that cholera was punishment for individual sin, and agreeing with medical reassurances to the public that those who lived more wholesomely would be spared, they were also in the difficult position of dealing with the stricken individual as part of a larger body, a national population. Thus, clergy were faced with the task of negotiating between a concept of individual sinfulness and the cholera as a specifically national punishment. The middle classes to whom such sermons were largely addressed were exhorted over the course of the century to feel socially responsible for the plight of the poor and to envision themselves and the poor as parts of a unified and responsible nation. But these social classes also tended to categorize themselves as separate from the very poor and sick, who were alternately seen as a festering illness in the social body and a foreign threat intruding upon it.

## OTHER CLERICAL RESPONSES, 1832–1867

The burden of the Anglican clergy in England was, in this way, unique.<sup>10</sup> Although many religious groups seemed to have joined in observance of the national fast day—on the day of Humiliation, medic and historian Thomas Shapter records that the Jewish synagogue, the Roman Catholic Church, the dissenting chapels, and the Anglican churches “were alike open, and crowded by attentive congregations” (254)—they did not all respond discursively in the same ways. Catholics in England laid low, published little on the causes of the cholera, and contented themselves with ministering to their flock, who were largely represented among the classes most affected.<sup>11</sup> Mass Irish emigration in the late 1840s from famine-struck Ireland also brought the usual responses to penurious immigrants, and was not improved by the typhus epidemic that attended the overcrowded Irish poor. The fact that these newcomers were largely Catholic did nothing to improve English attitudes toward Catholicism. Even as late as 1866, philanthropist Catherine Marsh, in a highly fictionalized account of cholera wards in which dying people burst spontaneously into hymns, concludes her tract with the “proven fact” that Rome is identical with Babylon:

Earnest Christians! to whom the truth of God is precious, and scarcely less precious your freedom to teach it to others—Protestant Christians! . . . Englishmen! who by the nobleness of nature God has given you, love the daylight of true English Institutions, without veil, vow, or mystery—awake to the danger of your religion and your country—with the resolve of “NO SURRENDER TO ROME!” If ever the saying were true, it is true for each one of you now, “NEUTRALITY IS TREASON,”—treason against the honour of your God—treason against the liberties of your land. (68–69)

In fact, often the sin most strongly hinted to be the deciding factor in God’s wrath was England’s tolerance of Catholicism—this could spill over even to ritualist forms of Anglicanism. G. Huelin notes that Anglican Bishop Jacobson was pelted with mud by “Orangemen” in Liverpool after blessing a cholera hospital because he put sisters in charge of it. The crowd yelled “Down with the old Puseyite Bishop!” (Huelin 138).<sup>12</sup>

The Methodists, by contrast, provide a good example of how a major dissenting group handled the epidemic. Although I have no comparable Methodist sermons to refer to (perhaps because they were not preserved or published, and were more often delivered extemporaneously than their Anglican counterparts), the treatment of the cholera epidemics in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, published in London, is quite different than that in Anglican sermons. Its first significant response came in 1832. Although the



magazine took up the cry of a national sin in the first epidemic, it completely dropped the topic after that. Further, even in the first epidemic, writers for the *Wesleyan* utilized the rhetoric of the Anglicans against the established church:

The present state of Great Britain is calculated to awaken deep anxiety in the breast of every Christian patriot. The Legislature is divided upon a question of great interest. . . . The sufferings of the poor are severe and extensive. A spirit of lawless riot is gone forth. . . . A pestilence, which has spread desolation over extensive islands and continents, which baffles the efforts of science and humanity . . . has already made its appearance in the Northern part of the island . . . no power but God can arrest its progress and cause it to disappear. . . . Should the pestilence become general, in addition to distress occasioned by the breaking of families, there will be an increased stagnation of trade, and consequent aggravation of the sufferings of the poor; and the resources of our public charities will be in a great measure dried up. The increase of crime is appalling; the national wickedness is great;—its guilt is enhanced . . . by the religious privileges which have been so long enjoyed and so grievously abused. . . . [The people] have to take the lead in humiliation and prayer; and to use, on behalf of a guilty land, that “power with God.” (“Didymus,” “Weekly Intercession Meeting” 12–15)

Here one sees the appeal to a “patriotic Christian” national identity of the “people” and the association of the disease with the “lawless” rioting of political protest. However, the national sin is *not* that of “the people” but of the established religious leadership. It is the people who must intercede with God on behalf of the guilty land. And of course, part of the sin is precisely the enjoyment of establishment prerogatives. Further, the poor are simply to be compassionated, not blamed, and the responsibility even for poverty may lie elsewhere.

“Didymus” was the only author in the *Wesleyan* who consistently tackled the “national sin” issue. On the occasion of the public fast, he says that God is indeed responsible for the “chastisement,” noting that “Nations, as such, have no existence in eternity [unlike individuals]. . . . Wicked nations, therefore are always punished in the present world” (“The Public Fast” 258).<sup>13</sup> (Innocent individuals, he assures his readers, will be compensated by God in the next life.) He emphasizes the efficacy of individual prayer (as opposed to the Anglican emphasis on group/national prayer) on behalf of *others*. Again, the parishioner is not the responsible party. The sins named are slavery in the West Indies, Sabbath profanation, infidelity to Christianity (here defined broadly as Christian values), the suffering of the poor, and finally, and most importantly, judging by the space given to it, *lack* of religious toleration.

While Christians of different denominations are conflicting with each other on account of their minor differences, and criminally endeavoring to weaken each other's influence, the enemy is actively employed in sowing the tares of infidelity and revolution; population has increased beyond all former example; and for a vast proportion of the people no religious instruction has been provided. These proceedings cannot but be displeasing to the Almighty God. (262)

This passage both recognizes that the Anglican church is using the epidemic for political purposes and condemns it—though the author goes on to use the cholera for his own political purposes in turn. It takes up the rhetoric seen later in sanitary texts (the Malthusian rhetoric of overpopulation, for example). But it also turns the establishmentarians' claim that religious diversity is fostering revolution on its head, suggesting that it is the refusal to countenance religious diversity that spawns "infidelity" (here to faith, rather than a particular church) and revolution.

In February 1832, also in the *Wesleyan*, an anonymous author writes, "God has a controversy with us. The national burdens are evidently too great for the . . . British empire. The country faints under its enormous load of debt and national expenditure" ("Retrospective of Public Affairs" 151). He warns that if political struggle should "arise, and noxious humours of the body politic grow" to spawn revolution, that there is a newly impoverished population, who, although well educated and accustomed to comfort, are now disaffected and nearly indigent. This group, he states, "would be both disposed and qualified to effect . . . mischief; and even under more favourable circumstances, the rapid increase of such a class of society, with the continually extending pauperization of multitudes of labourers and artisans, cannot be sufficiently deplored" ("Retrospective of Public Affairs" 151). Here the national sin is bad financial management, and a punitive system of poor relief, rather than the individual sins of the people. In short, these are economic and political evils, not violations of the commandments and certainly not apostasy.

The national and political bodies are not necessarily the same in this text, although there is clearly some relation between them: the nation is "burdened" economically, which creates the result of the body politic's potential illness. The body politic could contain within itself an enemy of the nation: a newly pauperized but intelligent out-group that might or might not be part of the nation per se. It was precisely the economic domain that slipped between the social and the political; in a free market, economics were supposed to operate autonomous of politics, as a self-regulating system much like the healthy body itself. Poovey claims that between the 1830s and '40s, the "social sphere . . . had come to mirror the economic domain" (11). Certainly, the economic was felt to be a measure of the health of the nation, not identical with the social

body, but closely aligned with it. Timothy Alborn has charted the use of epidemiological metaphors to define economic crises in this period, such as defining bank panics as “the Asiatic cholera of the commercial world” (282).<sup>14</sup> As Alborn points out, “intemperate” speculators were faced with the same Malthusian retributive God, who “unfailingly delivered pestilence as a positive check to working-class population growth” (283).

In the *Wesleyan*, the cholera was credited as a means of grace in some cases of deathbed conversions (Sugden 819–20). Further, unlike the relatively rare mentions of cholera deaths within the Anglican community (often the cause of death was hidden), the *Wesleyan* was full of obituaries in 1832 that record cholera as the cause of death of pious, respectable people. Later issues do not mention the cholera as a religious issue at all, nor do they connect disease to national identity. Further, unlike the Anglicans, the Methodists mention France’s epidemic with sympathy and suggest prayer for them. Like the Catholics’ claims in France, Anglicans’ claims that cholera was punishment for a specifically national sin of infidelity were weakened by the fact that cholera was a world pandemic, a fact that the government of France did not fail to point out to the Catholic Bishops (Delaporte).

R. J. Morris is the only scholar to date who has devoted considerable space to the discussion of the religious response in Britain in 1832. He identifies the common ground of the diverse clergy who responded to the cholera-sin equation as evangelicism; he sees them as making a fairly homogenous connection across the board between sin and divine vengeance in the cholera. Because he does not examine the role of reform or of nation, he misses some of the differences between pro-establishment Anglican evangelicals and dissenting evangelicals. He focuses only on the theological underpinnings of this attitude, and the one difference he does cite—that the lower down the social status scale the leadership of a religious group was, the more specific the sin was for which one was punished (154)—is explained in reference to the specific needs and habits of parishioners. For example, he notes that drink was a severe sin for Methodists because among the working classes drink might make the difference between comfortable survival and penury. This is a useful observation, but it seems clear upon further examination that the political issues of establishment and attitude toward reform also had a great deal to do with the way sins were described, especially whether cholera was defined as retribution for national sins or personal ones, although Morris does mention that the Methodists used the cholera to attack the established church’s attitude toward dissent (133).

Additionally, because Morris’s study is limited to 1832, he does not follow the further development of this discourse in subsequent epidemics, and so does not pay attention to the way the topic falls out of Methodist discourse after the 1832 epidemic. Morris very usefully observes, however, the tendency

of rural dissenting groups to hold revivals during cholera epidemics that depended heavily upon a rhetoric of self accusation (144–46). Although these seem to have been more directed toward personal than national guilt, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which they might have used the language of the establishment, since they published no tracts documenting their generally unscripted sermons. As Morris states, the “traditional Anglican” was often disturbed by the “dangerous enthusiasm” of the evangelicals, who would “make religion a matter of personal contact between man and his God, without the necessary intervention of the State and the traditional structures of the Church” (145). It is this representation that works against the overarching corporative response that the “national sin” rhetoric fostered. Charles Kingsley, Anglican minister and enlightened sanitarian, attacked the cholera-is-punishment attitude as barbarous and dangerous, heightening fear and exposure to illness rather than conserving the health and energy of the people. He associates this rhetoric with dissenting evangelical fringe groups. But the same charge was made against the established church by many medics in the mid-century epidemics of 1849–1855, and, as previously shown, the rhetoric of many Anglican sermons indeed blames the sinner, although simultaneously making gestures toward a corporate guilt. It is hard to say clearly what sect, if any, with which this attitude would have been most particularly associated.

Morris found evidence of only one Methodist cholera revival in 1854 (in Cornwall), at which “God the Avenger” still played a significant role (203). However, such rhetoric is common enough long before the cholera epidemics, and afterward, that one need not assume itinerant preachers were borrowing from Anglican evangelicals. It is highly probable, however, that these preachers were not making the same connections between establishment and the nation upon which the Anglican rhetoric depended so heavily. In short, like political radicals, Methodists used the existing rhetorical framework given by the hegemonic power for defining the epidemic. They then used it to contest that power by redefining meanings within the original explanatory structure for their own ends (e.g., the sin was sectarian intolerance, rather than infidelity or reform). They were also quicker to abandon this framework when it was not useful, and to use it to indict the powerful rather than to build national identity among their own parishioners. Establishmentarian Anglicans tried to include their congregations under a sense of national sinfulness, whereas the Methodists were more likely to warn their flock against individual sins, and cite national sins as those of Anglican clergy and Tory MPs. Thus, the initial religious response to the cholera in 1832 varied, but the responses coalesced around questions of sin and responsibility, national and minority identities. The second epidemic, however, would see considerably more complication in the responses, and a new group claiming a right to speak publicly about cholera and its meanings: medics.