

Cleanliness Next to Godliness: Christians in the Victorian Starch Industry

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For the purpose of this paper, the sense in which cleanliness connects with godliness derives from the prominent role played by a handful of non-conformist entrepreneurs whose impact on the consumer goods industries extended far beyond the significance of their businesses when measured by investment or other financial criteria. The historically strong association between marketing and the manufacture and sale of packaged branded products supplying cleanliness to all classes in the form of soap, starch, washing blue, and polish, adds a special interest to a discussion of the conference themes of the virtue of business and the business of virtue.

In pursuing the question of cleanliness next to godliness, the primary consideration in this paper is the connection between religious belief and the ethics of nonconformity and business conduct. For that purpose, we compare relevant aspects of the early histories of two British firms, J. & J. Colman of Stoke Holy Cross and subsequently Norwich, and Isaac Reckitt & Sons of Hull. Both were small to medium-sized firms during the period under consideration, but by the end of the century, they were the leading makers of starch and washing blue and figured among Britain's largest manufacturing companies. Reckitt's established branches in Sydney, Australia in 1888, and in New York in 1892.

What light does the experience of these firms (Colman's, owned and managed by Baptists, and Reckitt's, owned and managed by Quakers) throw on the connections between religion and business during the nineteenth century? Dismissing Weber's interpretation of the relation between capitalism and the Protestant ethic as the "least helpful explanatory factor" [Jeremy, 1988, p.18], Jeremy suggested several specific questions deserving consideration. How did church membership affect the history of their businesses? How were the ethics of nonconformity reconciled with self-advertisement and aggressive marketing? How sensitive were these entrepreneurs to market forces compared with other social considerations? What were their attitudes towards profit and its distribution? What were the cultural horizons bounding the vision of past generations of business leaders? How did the social teaching of the churches affect policies concerning employees and the wider community? [Jeremy, pp. 5-14].

In order to answer such questions with confidence, the identification of unambiguous connections, rather than deductive inferences, are necessary.

However, like most previous studies [See Pratt, 1985, pp.163-85], neither those by Jeremy's eight contributors [Jeremy, 1988] nor Walvin [1998] have produced much evidence which is more than merely consistent with a view which, contrary to Weber, regards participation in business to have presented a choice, rather than a congruency, between morals and money. Choosing morals rather than money is one of the principal reasons why Walvin described the Quakers as exceptional and why he maintained that "therein lay the key to their success" [Walvin, 1997, p.210]. It is not possible to answer all of Jeremy's questions for each firm, though there is evidence which relates to one, or the other, or both, and the value of which derives from being explicit in connecting beliefs and attitudes with action.

Origins: Firms and Families

J. & J. Colman began as a flour milling business founded by Jeremiah Colman in 1804; after the acquisition of a small mustard-making business in 1814, he added the production of starch in 1830, and later, washing blue. In 1823, the childless Jeremiah was joined in partnership by nephew James, aged 18, and subsequently, by two younger nephews, Jeremiah and Edward. The second family firm is that established by Isaac Reckitt. After failing twice as a miller and narrowly escaping a third collapse, he acquired the lease of a small starchworks in 1840 and diversified into washing blue and blacking (polish) in the 1850s. Through the successful manufacture and marketing of packaged, branded products these two were among the largest 100 manufacturing firms in Britain by the end of the century [Shaw, 1983, p. 52; Johnman, 1986, app.]. The decade of the 1830s brought about a changing economic environment for starchmakers resulting from deregulation and the removal of excise taxes [Peckham, 1986, pp. 24-32]. Such developments opened up opportunities for an expansion of demand and an intensification of competition between the typically large London producers who had dominated the luxury trade since the seventeenth century and producers in the grain-growing regions of Norfolk and east Yorkshire, notably from the new entrants to the trade, Colman's and Reckitt's. This occurred against a background of increasing demand for cleaning products, in part a consequence of the growing use of cotton apparel and an increasing public awareness of the link between cleanliness and health.¹ Both firms became acknowledged leaders in marketing, especially in advertising. Indeed, Jeremy's suggestion, based on the history of the Quaker-owned Rowntree enterprise, that the ethics of nonconformity were irreconcilable with aggressive marketing and self advertisement [Jeremy, 1988, p.8], finds no support in the histories of Colman's and Reckitt's which, beginning in the 1840s, were leading advertisers. Neither Baptist restraint nor Quaker humility and insistence on plainness inhibited the solicitation of testimonials or the use

¹ For the history of the soap industry and laundry in the nineteenth century on which these paragraphs are based, see Musson, 1965; Davidson, 1982; Malcolmson, 1986.

of superlatives, though the Reckitts' sense of modesty could lead to a rejection of a printer's choice of image.²

In each case, in the setting up of the enterprise, the network of nonconformist family and friends was important, though not unusual. From the time when Jeremiah James Colman, the son of a Norfolk farmer, acquired a small mustard-making mill in 1814, the firm continued to be owned wholly and managed by members of the Colman family until the merger with Reckitt's in 1938 [Southwell, 1925, pp. 1-13; Southwell, 1926, pp. 93-100; Mottram, chs 1 and 2]. The practice, which was common among family firms whereby the partners left balances in the business, provided the financial resources for growth which, except for cyclical difficulties, proved to be adequate.

By contrast, the early years of the Reckitt enterprise were accompanied by considerable financial problems which were solved, to an important extent, by the family's belonging to a Quaker network. The critical alliance which eventually led to the permanent foundation of the Reckitt starch business was Isaac's marriage to another Quaker, Ann Coleby, whose brothers-in-law included Ransome, a founder of a leading firm of farm implement manufacturers; Morland, who was also a manufacturer; Gripper, a substantial farmer; and an unnamed accountant [Chapman-Huston, 1927, p.53]. Their combined resources, connections, and advice were to become crucial after the loss of capital in the joint milling venture with his brother, Thomas Boston, which Isaac left in 1833, nearly two years before the partnership was declared insolvent.

Thereafter, financial support from his wife's family encouraged him to explore alternative ventures, none of which proved successful. However, in 1840, at the age of 48, the father of seven young children and possessing a track record of two business failures, a timely escape from a third, and several minor unsuccessful commercial diversions, his mother, brother, sister, brothers-in-law, and a friend provided a loan of £1540 to finance the leasing of a starchworks which enabled him to embark on his final and eventually successful business venture in Hull [RFP, Notes]. Clearly, the Coleby family's investment, which accounted for by far the greatest proportion, was unrelated to Isaac's previous history as an unsuccessful entrepreneur and almost certainly resulted from the Coleby family's concern for the interests of Ann Coleby, now Ann Reckitt. Not until 1847, after a further loan from a nephew, did the business begin to more than break even, a consequence mainly of the development by Isaac's second son, Frederick, of a recipe for soluble starch which was first introduced to grocers and chemists in the major towns of the north and the midlands³. The innovation, modest technically but presented forcefully through advertising and travelling, was the turning point for the

² R.289, Isaac to Currie & Kirkward, 24 Jan. 1851.

³ RFP Vol. 1, Isaac to George Reckitt, 7 Sept. 1844, 24 June 1847; George to Isaac, 21 Nov. 1848, 23 Feb. 1849.

partnership, though it was not until 1858 that the original family loans were paid off [Chapman-Huston, 1927, p. 121]. Thereafter, a combination of product development and diversification, an increasing sales force, and an intensive systematic advertising campaign moved the company onto a trajectory of expansion, profitability, and financial strength which equalled that of Colman's by the end of the century.

Little is known about the founder of J. & J. Colman, Jeremiah, a committed Baptist who admitted his nephew, James, into partnership in 1823 at the age of 22. James assumed the management of the business in the 1840s. The founder died in 1851 aged 74, followed by James in 1852, when James's own son, Jeremiah James, became the sole managing partner also at the age of 22 [Southwell, 1925, pp.1-9; 1926, p.93-100]. His influence was critical to the firm's culture and development which saw employment rise from barely 100 in the mid 1840s (compared with 51 at Reckitt's in 1851) to 500 in 1861 (compared with 210 at Reckitt's), reaching 1500 by the 1870s. The number employed at Reckitt's did not achieve that figure until after 1900 [Southwell, 1925, p.6; Colman, 1905, pp.136, 341; R 48, Staff census].

Baptists and Quakers: Morality and Moneymaking

In the mind of Jeremiah James Colman, engagement in business presented a conflict with the ethics of nonconformity. Following the religion of his parents, Jeremiah James, who was a teaching member of St Mary's Baptist chapel where he was deacon between 1861 and 1870, showed a devotion in the application of his strongly held religious convictions to his conduct in everyday life " by so acting that the world around us sees that in party strife or commercial enterprise we do that only which is consistent with our Christian profession" [Colman, 1905, p 134]. At the same time, there is evidence of his being a somewhat reluctant entrepreneur. The correspondence between him and his mother shortly after his father's death in 1851, reveals his need for reassurance that the moral imperatives of a nonconformist conscience would not conflict with the demands and responsibilities of running the family business. Perhaps reflecting on the experience of James, his father, an equally committed Baptist who died aged 53, Jeremiah James confessed to a fear that a life dedicated to the success and expansion of the business might leave insufficient time for service in the faith, self-improvement, and earnest recreation, and that "selfishness, influence, position and wealth so often associated with business would need to be resisted" [Colman, p.134]. His mother acknowledged the power which men of business possessed, yet observed that "It is too often the habit to decry and call it mercenary. I know it is highly disciplinary, and the means of immense usefulness... it is only to be deprecated where it is too absorbing to the time, and the means of storing wealth. A life of usefulness is offered to men of business - length of days has nothing to do with it..." [Colman, p.80]. She urged her son to "be diligent in business" and "not to rest there but be fervent in spirit serving the Lord, then indeed you

will be happy.”⁴ On assuming control of the business, Jeremiah James acknowledged the “perilous position” of being “at so young an age, master absolutely and unreservedly of so many people and sometimes to have to demand an implicit though it be reluctant obedience” [Colman, 1905, p80].

He came to accept that “We all have some work to perform and some position to fill and in proportion as we do them will be our record and happiness thereafter” [Colman, p.427]. Yet in 1855, he wrote of his shame that business engagements had engrossed his time or care to the exclusion of “infinitely more important things” [Colman, p.81]. His attitude towards his role in the business was to be useful in two ways which were in accordance with his mother’s prescription for a fulfilling but reverential business life. One was by increasing employment opportunities for Colman employees and their families in a town which had seen its staple industry destroyed; the second form which usefulness took was the promotion of the general well-being of the workers. The first was achieved through a combination of marketing innovation and business reorganisation. The second was attempted through an enlightened policy towards employees and the introduction of a wide range of welfare provision. Labour policy was informed by Jeremiah James’s feelings of responsibility towards his workers. Writing to the Rev. George Gould in 1861, declining an invitation to become a chapel deacon, Jeremiah James observed: “A master has an influence among his workmen no one else can exercise, and having now more than 500, what I am sure you will feel with me is that this is a little sphere or congregation where my time may often be employed.” [Quoted in Colman, 1905, p. 136].

When in 1883, Jeremiah Colman (Jeremiah James’s urbane nephew from the London sales branch) had joined the Board at Carrow in Norwich, he was struck by the unbusinesslike demeanour of his uncle whom he described as “soft-hearted, deeply religious, ever ready to assist men and causes in their time of need,...a dignified, quiet-going man whose trustfulness, simplicity and kind-heartedness were apparent.”⁵ “...Mr J.J.C, I consider, did more than anyone else to gain for the firm a reputation for generous and considerate treatment of staff and trader etc. and to establish the kindly relations and high ideals for which the company became renowned.” Jeremiah attributed these qualities to Jeremiah James’s experience of “the more polite and gentle methods (of business) in the Eastern Counties.” Jeremiah Colman also expressed himself puzzled as to how a person so soft-hearted as Jeremiah James (unable, for example, to reprimand and present an ultimatum to a commercial traveller whose drinking was affecting his work) could have successfully managed the business.⁶ The soft-heartedness remarked upon by Jeremiah Colman may be attributed, at least in part, to Jeremiah James’s belief in the “voice of conscience” in which he recognised “Divine Guidance” [Colman, 1905, p. 244]; “it is by taking

⁴ Colman papers, Mary to Jeremiah James Colman, n.d., 1848.

⁵ Jeremiah Colman, “J. & J. Colman, 1883-1925”, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

religion into everyday life and by so acting that the world around us sees that in...commercial enterprise we do that and that only which is consistent with our Christian profession." [Quoted in Colman, 1905, p.144].

Practising Quakers, the Reckitts interpreted their faith in similar ways as regards workers' charitable and philanthropic activities but rather differently in their approach to business management. Isaac, founder of Reckitt's, has been described as possessing an "extremely reserved and taciturn habit of mind" [Chapman-Huston, p. 147]. Almost paralysed with neuritis when he started the business [Colman, 1905, p.60], he displayed "a Quaker belief in plain dealing and value for money" and "...cut no great figure in his own day" [Chapman-Huston, 1927, pp. 138, 146-7]. Both he and his wife shared daily bible readings [Chapman-Huston, pp.147, 208]. The culture established at the Reckitt enterprise in Hull was as much influenced by Isaac's sons, especially James and Francis, after George's departure to London in 1864. Francis became a partner in 1852 at the age of 25 when the partnership employed fewer than 100 workers [Chapman-Huston, 1927 p.119]. James, who was six years younger than Francis, became a partner in 1862 on his father's death. Little is known of Francis's temperament, though it seems that it was James, the more cautious of the two brothers, who emerged as the more forceful administrator. He is said to have "lacked warmth" with a tendency to be "immoderate in argument" (particularly with his third and older brother, George), "even hot-headed into middle age" [Chapman-Huston, 1927, p. 272]. In the opinion of Thomas Ferens, general manager and later chairman of the company, "James was a master of detail with a prodigious memory and an inability to waste time" [Chapman-Huston, p. 277]. Yet as a young man, James suffered from pulmonary consumption which between 1861 and 1864 had caused him to be absent from the business for several winter months each year and threatened his future career in the business [Chapman-Huston, pp.124, 165, 314]. For him, as for his father, health continued to be a problem throughout his life.

As was the case in the Colman family, the women provided moral uplift and reassurance in the faith. In 1846, young James's sister ended her letter with "Farewell dear boy, seek above everything else to remember continually that this world is but a preparation for another, an eternal one" [Chapman-Huston, p. 94]. Letters from Isaac's wife to George, who had just entered the business at the age of eighteen, and to James, the youngest, who joined at seventeen, convey something of the ethos which surrounded their upbringing. When James began travelling for the firm, Ann wrote to urge him to keep his spirits up "and endeavour cheerfully to meet the disagreeables that lie in thy path...." Stressing that he was "filling a useful and responsible situation to the satisfaction of thy dear father, as well as thy brothers," she added, "I do not look forward to thy growing grey on the road" [Chapman-Huston, p.115]. Writing to George, she urged him not to associate any "humiliating feeling" concerning poverty with a lack of money but "with insufficient effort."⁷ Unremitting effort, diligence, service to others, and dedication to religious belief were evident in

⁷ RFP, Ann to George, n.d. 1843.

the lives of the first and second generation Reckitts of Hull. In 1879, James wrote to his eldest son who was about to attend school: "We are not given this life only to do as we like, and to enjoy ourselves...but to fit us for the eternal life after this, and to try to be good, so that our Father in Heaven may have more angels to glorify Him and serve Him, and be happy in Heaven ourselves" [Chapman-Huston, 1927, p. 195]. The Quaker imperative was that all should be dealt with honestly and justly. The Reckitts had no doubt that unpaid bills by suppliers or customers justified pursuit through the courts, that wages had to be cut if financial circumstances were difficult, and that employees could not expect to perform below acceptable standards. In 1843, Isaac dismissed the foreman because "...he was so profligate in his conduct that I could not with propriety continue him in a situation of trust."⁸ He approached the problem of dealing with his female workers, whom he considered "took a deal of looking after," through dismissals. "I think," he wrote to George in 1849, "we must cull another or two as a salutary example & warning. We are sadly behindhand in orders..." [Chapman-Huston, 1927, p.113]. Alcohol abuse was dealt with firmly at Reckitt's, where the policy was either instant dismissal of the offending salesman or probation -conditional on the culprit's signing of the pledge.⁹

Whereas Baptists relied on conscience to withstand the potentially corrupting influence of life in business, the Society of Friends was a great deal more interventionist in the affairs of members to ensure they observed the requirements of Quaker stewardship. Young Friends were urged to adopt early and regularly "a clear and methodical system of keeping their accounts," while Quakers in general were urged "not to be negligent in business, but give an account by word or writing, how things are" at the quarterly Meeting which was the forum for judging whether clear and accurate accounts were being kept [Pratt, 1985, p.29]. Dissatisfaction with financial affairs by the Meeting could result in the imposition of disciplinary measures which included, in the event of a failure to satisfy creditors, expulsion from the Society according to the sense of the Meeting recorded by the clerk [Chapman-Huston, 1927, p.67]. According to Isaac Reckitt's wife (the couple were regular attenders of the Meeting and daily bible readers throughout their lives) [Chapman-Huston, pp. 147-208], Isaac narrowly escaped censure as a result of the trading difficulties he experienced when in partnership with his brother, Thomas, between 1833 and 1835. It was the bankruptcy of that partnership which occurred more than a year after Isaac had withdrawn from it which prompted the intervention of local Quakers. Having quit the business and left both nominal capital and debts to Thomas before insolvency, Isaac escaped being disowned, though Thomas was found guilty of culpable negligence (but not of deliberate or intentional fraud) [Chapman-Huston, pp. 65-7]. Ann Reckitt later criticised the procedure adopted by the Meetings which did not allow the accused to be present as a witness. She accused those who pressed the case against him of

⁸ RFP, Isaac to George Reckitt, 14 Dec. 1843.

⁹ R9, Copying book, 12 Nov. 1879, 13 May 1882; R290, Letter book, 8 June 1898.

victimisation [Chapman-Huston, pp.66, 147]. After an appeal against the local verdict which was followed by a lengthy process of review by several higher Quaker authorities, Thomas suffered disownment which put an end to his business career [RFP, Notes]. In 1864, "instigated by Christian love and mutual friendship," a Committee of Friends arbitrated a disagreement between the brothers over Isaac's will.¹⁰

Policies and Corporate Cultures

In both firms a system of welfare arrangements began to evolve once the firms had established an enduring existence and medium size. The implementation of some of those introduced at Carrow was the responsibility of Jeremiah James's wife, Caroline Colman, who also initiated some of her own. These included a school for employees' children beginning in 1857, a works kitchen serving workers with hot midday meals at nominal cost from 1867, and low cost lodging accommodation and laundry for female workers. A dispensary was opened in 1864, staffed by a doctor and sick nurse, while in 1878, sick visiting of workers' families was introduced following the appointment of a nursing assistant [Colman, 1905, pp.125-9]. The Colmans introduced a sickness benefit scheme in 1862, as did the Reckitts in 1882, while in both businesses subsequent measures included non-contributory pensions and forms of "prosperity sharing" [Southwell, 1926, pp. 93-9; Mottram, 1950? pp. 11-14, 99, 131-2; Chapman-Huston, 1927, pp. 166, 299-300, 294-312]. Hull Garden Village, financed by James Reckitt, was built in 1908, a project intended to provide local workers with low rental houses with gardens which were close to the factory and had access to outdoor amenities [Chapman-Huston, 1927, pp. 238-41]. Charitable donations to the local sick, poor, and orphans supplemented welfare provision for workers. Both Jeremiah James Colman and James Reckitt were active Liberals on the Labourist wing [Colman 1905, p.185, 235; Chapman-Houston, 1927, p.214].

Divergent growth rates and product development were associated with contrasts in business culture. It is not easy to disentangle the relative importance of the influence of religious beliefs from the individual temperaments of the key figures who formed the respective cultures of the two companies. For more than forty years after the founder's death, Colman's was controlled and directed by Jeremiah James Colman from Norwich, where the factory was located; two Colman cousins managed the London sales office, becoming partners in 1875. Until Reckitt's began to secure a substantial share of the starch trade by the end of the century, apart from the 1866 financial crisis, the Colman business experienced no serious setbacks. Jeremiah attributed the success of the business to the trust which others invested in his uncle, Jeremiah James, who had developed friendly relations between the principal British starch-

¹⁰ RFP, Samuel Priestman to George Reckitt, 14 March 1864.

makers of the International Starch Association instituted in 1908.¹¹ By contrast, during its formative years Reckitt's was owned and managed by a founder who had experienced failures and a protracted period of difficulties in business. At the same time, a division between junior Reckitt family partners during the firm's formative years was another influential factor in corporate culture formation

The Reckitt brothers withdrew from the day-to-day management of the business, appointing (from outside the family) the first works manager in 1872 and a second in 1874. On incorporation in 1878, Francis and James were chairmen of the company in alternate years, though Francis gave up routine management when Thomas Ferens (a committed Methodist) became general manager (and later chairman) in 1883 [RFP Notes]. Thereafter, James became increasingly involved in local politics and philanthropy. Both works managers became company directors in 1888 [Chapman-Huston, 1927, pp.199, 210-223]. On the election of Jeremiah James as Liberal MP for Norwich in 1871, the partners appointed the first outsider as "general manager." E. B. Southwell, who was an acquaintance made through attendance at Sunday services [Colman, 1905, p.84], became general manager in 1898, though not until 1913 did he become the first non-family director [Carrow Mag., Jan. 1914]. That event was a consequence of the death of Jeremiah James's son-in-law who had become a director in 1896, when Colman's became a limited company, and who, from 1898, took a leading role in managing the company [Stuart, 1911, 267; Edgar, 1984, p.10]. Both Ferens and Stuart emulated the Colman and Reckitt families by spending increasing time and resources in philanthropic works and, as radical Liberal nonconformists, engaging in public and political activities.

The similarities between the welfare policies developed by the two companies is in contrast to their histories before their eventual financial amalgamation in 1938. In 1917, a discussion took place between the respective general managers regarding the possibility of amalgamation which was then being pressed by Colmans' directors. Comparisons which they drew between the two firms highlighted Colman's policy as having been devised with an eye "to conserving its business," whereas Reckitt's had been "in the direction of exploiting and expansion."¹² The respective companies' product ranges had diverged increasingly from 1853, when Reckitt's added black lead polish to starch and blue, for in the long term the polish market was to grow whereas the demand for mustard would not. This diversification and the decisions which led to the introduction of new products largely explains why the performance and growth of the two companies differed and enabled the late-comer, Reckitt's, to overtake Colman's in size and profitability in a massive surge of investment, marketing, and sales at the end of the nineteenth century.

¹¹ Jeremiah Colman, "J. & J. Colman, 1883-1925", pp.1-2.

¹² R 300, Correspondence, overseas trading, 6 Sept. 1917.

By 1900, Reckitt's employed roughly 3,000 which compared with fewer than 2,500 at Colman's¹³

Reflections

How far was the success achieved by Colman's and Reckitt's in the cleanliness business promoted by godliness? This question raises the wider issue of whether the ethics of nonconformity were polar opposites to entrepreneurial (or "capitalistic") behaviour or positively conducive to effective business activity. An heroic attempt to compile a "religious propensity for economic activity" based on an analysis of evidence relating to the late eighteenth century showed Quakers and Baptists to be among the denominations most likely to engage in business [Pratt, 1985, Table I]. The evidence presented above indicates a common approach to work and wealth on the part of the Baptist Colmans and the Quaker Reckitts. Wealth resulted from work. The temptations which accompanied wealth could be countered by regarding it as being held in trust to share with others, whether through welfare provision for employees or broader philanthropic measures designed to help a wider local population: the uneducated, the sick, the orphaned, the poor. While the provision of welfare for workers was consistent with policies which might have been motivated by a rational aim to foster compliance and loyalty, the evidence of "good works," more widely spread, suggests that the benevolence manifested by the Colmans and Reckitts was inspired by religious and spiritual concerns as well as the humane considerations of businessmen of integrity: that godliness, rather than secular concern, was the origin.

That the outcome of those policies should have formed the basis of two of Britain's largest manufacturing companies underlines the congruency between nonconformity and capitalism which Weber emphasised, though it does not undermine the spiritual foundation of entrepreneurial conduct. The history of the two firms emphasises the obvious: that the relationship between religion and business might vary according to environmental influences (education and life experiences) as well as temperament. It would be unwise to generalise from this comparison between only two enterprises. However, because of the explicit nature of the evidence, the conclusion is important: the conduct of business (and philanthropy) can be described as sound when measured by religious and moral criteria; it is evident that an elective affinity may be discerned between Protestant stewardship and entrepreneurship.

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