

Gale Primary Sources

Start at the source.

Religion and *Punch*: How to Approach the *Punch Historical Archive*

Dominic Janes

University of London



Introduction: Different Approaches, Different

Considerations

A large online database has the power to deliver huge quantities of information at great speed. It will not, however, analyse the resulting slew of texts and images. Therefore, it is important to manage the process of engagement with *Punch* that this resource provides in order to deliver representative but manageable results. The first thing to think about is scale of engagement. Clearly someone who is preparing a ten-minute in-class presentation is going to want to use the resource in a very different way from someone who is writing a book on the topic. A clear distinction might also be made between those seeking to find a limited number of key examples to illustrate an argument and others who wish to explore the full minutiae of a topic between specific dates. The former approach requires a precise consideration of search terms in order to produce effective results whilst the latter may require not only investigation via keyword but also examination of entire issues using period-based searches.

Beyond this it is important to be clear about the disciplinary focus of the project. Above all, are you approaching this topic from the point of view of religious or cultural studies? In the case of the former you may be seeking to explore particular theological controversies within Christianity or within other major world religions. In the case of the latter you may see religion as a mere element within the wider cultural patterns of the time. Finally, it is important to think about the issue of representation. Is your focus concerned specifically with visual imagery, or textual discussions, or a combination of the two?

Punch and Religious Affairs

Whatever your approach it is important to have some overview of religious history in Britain as *Punch* tended to respond to matters that were well-known at the time. Because nineteenth century Britain was, in general, a markedly more religious society than that of, say, the later twentieth century, it is hardly surprising that the earlier volumes of the periodical have much more to say about religious issues than do the later ones. This is reflected in the academic literature which is heavily focussed on the first half of the Victorian period when religious controversy was one of the major topics of concern in *Punch*. The key locale for the publication of such work is the academic journal *Victorian Periodicals Review* and two examples are:

- McNees, Eleanor, 'Punch and the Pope: Three Decades of Anti-Catholic Caricature', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 37.1 (2004): 18-45
- Janes, Dominic, 'The Role of Visual Appearance in *Punch's* Early Victorian Satires on Religion', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 47.1 (2014): 66-86

A second reason for a focus on this period is that *Punch* is widely seen as being an influential vehicle of middle-class opinion at this time. So it may be useful to think about its circulation at a particular date and the degree to which its views were taken seriously.

Consideration of circulation raises the important issues of the magazine's changing public role and of its evolving understanding of the nature of humour. To summarise what are, of course, much more complicated patterns of change, *Punch* became slowly

less radical over time and its humour became less biting and more lightly amusing. One element which remained more or less consistent, however, was amused attention to stereotypes. Individuals were typically stereotyped in relation to preconceived opinions toward normal behaviour on the part of institutions which were, supposedly, charged with maintaining high moral standards. Thus the typical charges against bishops, priests and other religious functionaries involved a combination of pomposity and hypocrisy. *Punch*, in general, situated itself as critic of what it saw as any form of strange or exotic religiosity. These were, in its first decades, typically depicted as being amusingly deluded when they were not positively dangerous. Over time the former stance came to take precedence over the latter as the public came to regard religious matters as being of declining national importance.

Use of Search Terms: Contemporary Usage and Spellings

When using search terms to explore these issues it is vital to think in terms of the classifications and meanings employed at the time. So for instance, the word 'Islamic' was hardly used before the mid-twentieth century but extensive references to this great world religion can be discovered by searching using the word 'Mohammed'. However, *Punch* contributors were notably, and sometimes deliberately, vague about religious nomenclature, such that it will be necessary to look for variant spellings such as 'Muhammed' and 'Mahomet'. Similarly 'Hindoo' was the normal spelling of 'Hindu' during the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, *Punch* contributors made extensive use of metonyms (in other words the use of one word to stand for another). Sometimes these are easy to guess. Roman Catholicism was conjured up, for instance, by 'Rome', 'Papacy' and 'Pope'. In other cases only recourse to secondary literature such as Diarmid A. Finnegan, 'Exeter Hall Science and Evangelical Rhetoric in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16.1 (2011): 46–64, will reveal that the phrase 'Exeter Hall' could stand in for 'evangelical'. The Catholic revival movement within the Church of England was most frequently referred to by the term 'Puseyism' with reference to the Oxford theologian E. B. Pusey. Finally, a conscientious search for Pope Pius IX may not turn up squibs satirising 'Pio Nono' (the Pope's name in Italian) or even 'Pio No! No!' (10 March 1866: 100) and other irreverent variants.

The Benefits of Browsing

If the aim is to get a really detailed look at a specific set of events it may be best to use the Browse by Date functionality rather than keywords since many references to religion, particularly with regard to the cartoons, may otherwise be missed. To give one example, 'The Kidnapper.-A Case for the Police', (29 March 1851: 129), is actually a fascinating representation of a predatory monk. By using this search method it will soon become clear that for several months between 1850 and 1851 over two-thirds of the full-page cartoons were on anti-Catholic themes. Understanding such a concentration of interest requires thinking about the editorial policies of the periodical at the time and the particular set of artists and writers that were contributing to it. It is also highly useful to carry out some contextualisation with other

leading periodicals, the obvious one being *The Times*, in order to appreciate quite why the United Kingdom was going through a major spasm of religious disturbance (it was because Pope Pius IX had just declared the re-establishment of the hierarchy of Roman Catholic bishops which had been in abeyance since the actions of King Henry VIII in setting up the Church of England in the sixteenth century).

A Selection of Suggested Search Terms

In relation to Christianity the periodical's anti-Catholic tendencies mean that any variant of 'Papal', 'Papacy', 'Pope', 'Catholic' or 'Roman' will yield good results, but be aware that the last could also pull up references to the city of Rome or to the Roman Empire. The various Protestant denominations can be searched under their own names ('Baptist', etc) save that it was often thought superfluous to explain that the Bishop of London, to give one example, was an Anglican. Therefore for the Church of England it is best to search for particular individuals or positions such as 'Archbishop of Canterbury'. In descending order of frequency *Punch* discussed Judaism, various forms of unspecified 'heathenism' (which could refer to general immorality), Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. Religions were often discussed in relation to individuals and, hence, good search terms to employ are 'Jew', 'Hindoo', 'Heathen', 'Pagan', 'Mahomet' and 'Buddha'. Most of these terms could be employed as adjectives as well as nouns as in 'a wretched heathen' or a 'heathen wretch'.

Key Cartoons and Articles

If you are, for instance, looking to explore *Punch* in terms of anti-Catholic imagery you might start with the term 'Christian' but this will produce far too many results. And in fact this positive term was often not applied to forms of Christianity of which *Punch* disapproved. So, following the suggestions in the previous section, a search under 'Pope' will produce much more manageable results. These can then be sub-searched to give a list of cartoons. By scanning through a number of these it will become clear that a standard visual stereotype was employed for the depiction of the Pope which focussed on excessively ostentatious regalia.

However, it will also become clear that other stereotypes were used to mock the Papacy as in The Pope in his Chair in which the regalia have been added to the attributes and dress of a Turkish sultan. A search for cartoons using 'Sultan' will rapidly reveal that a similar visual joke (Christian as an 'oriental') was made a few decades later. This means not only that political and religious authority was often conflated, bearing in mind that the Turkish sultan was also the Islamic caliph, but also one religion might be satirised by reference to another. Searching religious topics in *Punch* will thus tend to yield a repeated pattern of stereotypes, most notably in cartoons, but also in print articles. The identification of such patterns is one of the key results that can be obtained from these searches, since individual events, such as Papal pronouncements, characteristically resulted in the dusting off of the familiar jokes (and prejudices) of yesteryear.

Thus awareness of religious and racial stereotypes can enhance search results. For instance Jews were typically shown in *Punch* as having large noses (see, for instance, the many images of Benjamin Disraeli). Therefore a search for 'Jew', and then a secondary search for 'nose' will rapidly turn up such characteristic combinations of verbal and visual anti-semitism as in *The Harp of the Hebrew Minstrel*.

The Harp of the Hebrew Minstrel

Some characteristic representations of Catholics and Jews have been suggested above. Further examples of key religious stereotypes include Anglo-Catholics in Britain (for examples see Jamie Horrocks, 'Asses and Aesthetes: Ritualism and Aestheticism in Victorian Periodical Illustration', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 46.1 (2013): 1-36.) and various forms of exotic religion in the Empire (for examples see Julie F. Codell 'Imperial Differences and Culture Clashes in Victorian Periodicals' Visuals: The Case of *Punch*', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 39.4 (2006): 410-428).

The various empirical crises are particularly productive of religious imagery, as in the representations of Muslims and Hindus in the aftermath of the 'Indian Mutiny', as it was then known, of 1857. Thus a final mode of search would be to focus on a specific event such as this, and then use a search within the results to obtain images of a particular religious group in a specific historical context.

Conclusion: New Areas of Study

To sum up, the *Punch Historical Archive* makes one of

Britain's most important periodicals widely available and the combination of keyword and date-based searching enables this material to be explored in exciting new ways and with much greater efficiency than hitherto. However, in order to produce meaningful results it is important to carry out appropriate preparatory reading into both the nature of the periodical itself and into the evolution of attitudes to various forms of religion in Britain over time. The pages of *Punch* have been explored in some detail in relation to Roman Catholicism and Judaism (as in representations of the Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli). However, images of other world religions, and indeed other aspects of religious life such as spiritualism, have received much less attention. The use of carefully structured search plans has great potential to further our knowledge of a wide variety of representations of religion that shed considerable light not only on the attitudes of the contributors to *Punch* but also on those of its influential readership.

CITATION

Janes, Dominic: "Religion and *Punch*: How to Approach the *Punch Historical Archive*." *Punch Historical Archive 1841-1992*: Cengage Learning 2014

© Cengage Learning 2014

