

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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A THEOLOGICAL CRISIS

The English Revolution was a theological crisis, a struggle over the identity of British Protestantism. Thomas Hobbes would later say that ‘the cause of the civil war’ was ‘nothing other than the quarrelling about theological issues’.¹ This was a reductionist analysis, but it contained a kernel of truth. The Church of England and the Church of Scotland had experienced very different reformations in the sixteenth century, but both had been aligned with international Calvinism, or what contemporaries called ‘the Reformed churches’. Under Charles I and Archbishop Laud, however, there was a concerted campaign to remodel the British churches. In matters of doctrine, the Laudians rejected the predestinarianism of Zwingli and Calvin, preferring the teaching of the Greek Fathers and the Dutch Arminians who had emphasised the synergy of divine grace and human freewill in salvation. In matters of worship, Laudians sought to infuse ‘the beauty of holiness’ into Protestantism through choral music, elaborate vestments, liturgical rites and restoration of altars. Communicants were to kneel at the altar rails, and receive the elements from the priest, thus imbibing a high view of both the eucharist and the priestly office. In matters of discipline and government, the Laudians asserted the authority of the higher clergy over parish pastors, often justifying this by a divine right (*jure divino*) theory of episcopacy that cast doubt on the legitimacy of the ministry in Europe’s non-episcopal Reformed churches. These policies involved a fundamental realignment of the *Ecclesia Anglicana*. Instead

of identifying with the Reformed churches of Switzerland, France and the Netherlands, it would discover a unique identity as the purest embodiment of the early patristic church. Finally, in their political theology, the Laudians articulated an exalted conception of kingship – the king's authority came directly from God, not the people, and he had an inviolable and quasi-sacramental status as the Lord's Anointed. It was a vision of hierarchy, order and beauty that appealed powerfully to Charles I.²

The king's Personal Rule (1629-40) was ended by the Scottish Covenanters, who initially rose up against the imposition of a new liturgy, and quickly abolished episcopacy. They forced the king to recall the Westminster Parliament, and it emphatically reversed the Laudian 'innovations' in 1640-41. But Puritans wanted to do more than turn the clock back to 1625. They had always believed that the English Church was 'but halfly reformed'; now was their chance to complete the reformation. In 1643, the Parliamentarians signed a Solemn League and Covenant with the Scottish Covenanters. The first article set an agenda for religious reform. It committed both parties to 'the preservation of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland' and 'the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline and government, according to the Word of God, and the example of the best reformed Churches'. They also agreed 'to bring the Churches of God in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of Church government, directory for worship and catechising'.³

The problem was that 'the Word of God' and 'the best reformed Churches' did not speak with one voice. Reformed churches had variously adopted episcopacy, presbyterianism and congregationalism, and Protestants were often divided over matters of biblical interpretation. While theological tradition still carried great weight, it was relatively easy to legitimise

intellectual novelty on grounds of 'further reformation'. The eschatological excitement of the 1640s and 1650s strengthened the hand of innovators. Many Puritans believed that they were living in the last days predicted by the prophet Daniel and the Book of Revelation. God was destroying Antichrist, restoring the Church, and revealing 'new light' from his Word.⁴

A torrent of religious works poured forth from London presses. Between 1640 and 1661, the London bookseller George Thomason collected approximately 15,000 books and pamphlets. On average, 'explicitly religious titles averaged between twenty and fifty per month', around half the total number.⁵ In 1641, for example, more than two hundred pamphlets were published on the subject of episcopacy alone. Root and Branch reformers, like John Milton, argued for its abolition, while Joseph Hall and other bishops made the case for divine right episcopacy. Many rejected both extremes, advocating either a return to the Reformed episcopate of the Jacobean years or a 'reduction' of episcopacy on the lines suggested by the patristic scholarship of Archbishop Ussher.⁶ No secular issue in that critical year generated this volume of print – it was the first of a series of religious controversies that dominated the book market. Among publications by women, prophecy constituted the single largest genre in the 1640s, Quaker works in the following decade - together they comprised more than half of the printed writings of women during the Revolution.⁷ The public appetite for religious debate was voracious. By 1660, hundreds of public disputations had been held between Puritan clergy and sectarians like the Baptists and the Quakers, attracting throngs of spectators. England had become a religious marketplace.⁸

FORGING CONFESSIONAL ORTHODOXY

This was not supposed to happen. In 1640, Parliamentary leaders had no intention of letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend. (Exceptions were Robert Greville, second Baron Brooke, author of *The Nature of Truth*, and Sir Henry Vane the younger, former governor of Massachusetts, both unusually sympathetic to radical ideas among the godly). Once the Civil War began, Parliament called a learned Assembly of Divines at Westminster to make official recommendations for reform of the Church. As its leading historian explains, ‘To the extent that religion was a cause of the first civil war, this Assembly at Westminster was supposed to be a solution’.⁹ It was the last of the major post-Reformation synods and the largest parliamentary committee. Its membership was comprised of 120 Puritan divines, ten members of the House of Lords, twenty members of the Commons (including the formidably erudite Hebraist, John Selden), and a team of Scottish commissioners, both clerical and lay. In hundreds of plenary sessions between 1643 and 1647, these men debated issues of doctrine, worship, discipline and church government. Scribes recorded the substance of their debates, though a complete transcription of the Assembly’s minutes was not published until 2012.¹⁰ What were published at the time were the Assembly’s major documents, the ones envisaged by the Solemn League and Covenant: a new confession of faith (the Westminster Confession), Larger and Shorter Catechisms, a Directory for Worship, a Directory for Ordination, and a Directory for Church Government.

Because historians of ideas privilege innovatory individuals, we tend to overlook the role of corporate bodies in shaping intellectual traditions. Synods and assemblies imposed a discipline

on theologians. Their task was to identify the teaching of the Scriptures, to work faithfully within the tradition of the best reformed churches, to seek consensus amidst their disagreements, and to address new challenges and ideas. They could do so using the tools of scholastic logic and humanist learning, and with reference to the Bible, the Fathers, Reformation theologians and earlier Reformed confessions. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Reformed churches had a mature and highly articulated theological tradition. It was codified in a series of national confessions of faith – including the Helvetic, the French, the Belgic, the English Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563, and the Irish Articles of 1615. It had been solidified at the international synod of Dort which repudiated Arminianism in 1618-19. And it had been expounded at length and in depth by a long line of distinguished Reformed divines – Zwingli, Bullinger, Bucer, Martyr, Calvin, Beza, Musculus and Paraeus.¹¹

Thus the Westminster Assembly was working within well-established parameters, and its Confession was a precise summation of Reformed Protestant orthodoxy. It began with the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*: ‘The Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture’ was ‘the Supreme Judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits are to be examined’ (I.10). To underline the point, the divines provided hundreds of biblical proof texts for every statement in the Confession. This thoroughgoing Biblicism was a key feature of Puritan theology in the Revolution, and it placed a question mark against the status of extra-biblical statements of faith. Clergy in the English Church had been required to subscribe to the ecumenical creeds (the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed) and all three had been used in the Prayer Book Service. But a substantial minority of Westminster divines (whom John Lightfoot dubbed the ‘excepters’) challenged the imposition of these

‘forms’, and (by implication) of the Assembly’s own Confession. This provoked the synod’s longest-running debate, and although the ‘creedalists’ majority voted that ‘the three creeds are thoroughly to be received’, later Assembly documents like the Directory, the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms were silent on the Creeds.¹²

Despite these hesitations, however, the Confession emphatically endorsed Trinitarian orthodoxy, using the conceptual categories of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). ‘In the unity of the Godhead’, it asserted, ‘there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost’ (II.3). Christ was ‘the second person of the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father’. In him, ‘two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion’ (VIII.2).

As well as entrenching Trinitarianism, the Confession was designed to defend Calvinist orthodoxy, especially the doctrine of predestination that had come under assault from within the Reformed churches by Arminians. Chapter III was entitled ‘God’s Eternal Decree’, and it taught that ‘By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death’ (III.3). This had been done ‘without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto’ (III.5).

The heart of the Confession set out classic Reformed soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), devoting chapters to Effectual Calling, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification, Saving Faith, Repentance, Good Works, Perseverance and Assurance. The divines upheld Reformation

principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fides*, but the Confession displayed a characteristically Reformed concern for the role of the law in the life of the believer and the Christian community. Hence the chapters on God's law and 'Christian Liberty', oath-taking, Sabbath-keeping, magistracy, marriage and divorce, the sacraments and church discipline. In addressing such matters, the divines were determined to leave no room for libertines and antinomians (whom the Assembly's minutes mention twice as often as papists).

The Confession was a meticulously crafted collective statement, designed to give the impression of unanimity. But it disguised years of internal debate on a raft of issues. Protocol forbade the divines from divulging these disputes, but the controversy over ecclesiology did reach the public domain. This consumed a quarter of the Assembly's 1333 plenary sessions, a fifth of its *ad hoc* committees, and a quarter of its texts. A small minority (the 'Dissenting Brethren' or 'Apologists') issued a public statement, *An Apologeticall Narration* (1643/44), which explained that they favoured a middle way between separatism and Presbyterianism – 'the Congregational Way'. The Congregationalists had set up self-governing congregations during their exile in the Netherlands in the 1630s, and they did so again in England in the 1640s. Led by Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye, they drew inspiration from the New England churches, and especially from the theologian John Cotton. Another minority, the Erastians, included John Lightfoot, Thomas Coleman and John Selden. They argued strenuously that the power of church discipline (especially excommunication) should rest in the hands of the civil magistrates rather than the clergy, and their position was firmly endorsed by Parliament itself. But the majority of Westminster divines favoured a Presbyterian form of church government, in which individual congregations were subject to the authority of local presbyteries, regional assemblies and general assemblies or synods. In contrast to the Erastians, the Presbyterians were keen to preserve

clerical authority. Against the Congregationalists, they were opposed to the gathering of congregations, and firmly committed to the parish as the basic ecclesial unit.

However, this neat three-party taxonomy obscures as much as it clarifies. Recent scholarship has shown that the patterns of clerical alignment shifted in kaleidoscopic fashion from debate to debate. When the Assembly tackled the locus of church authority ('the power of keys') in the autumn and winter of 1643-44, the Congregationalists repudiated the populist notion (associated with separatists and radical Independents) that church power was located in the congregation as a whole, insisting instead that it rested with both the people and their elders. The Erastians maintained that the power of the keys was shared by godly magistrates. As for the Presbyterians, they were divided. Some, like the Scottish commissioners Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie, were surprisingly sympathetic to the Dissenting Brethren and keen to accord some power to the congregation. The English Presbyterian majority, however, was staunchly clericalist, and located the power of the keys in the presbytery (pastors and elders governing multiple congregations). It was led by two of the Assembly's dominant figures, Cornelius Burgess (the acting prolocutor) and Lazarus Seaman, who ensured that the Scots and the Apologists were sidelined. Moderate English Presbyterians like Stephen Marshall and Charles Herle attempted to mediate, but to no avail. Yet close study of the debate punctures several myths about the Assembly. The English Presbyterians were not meekly led towards clericalism by tough-minded Scots; the Scots (with the exception of Robert Baillie) were not the polar opposites of the Congregationalists; and the Congregationalists were less isolated than their critics alleged.¹³

When we examine theological debates within the Assembly, the complexity of alignments becomes even more striking. Reformed divines were divided over the extent of the atonement –

did Christ die for the elect alone, or did he atone for the whole of humanity? Hypothetical universalists like Archbishop Ussher and John Davenant had each argued for the latter proposition, and a significant minority of Westminster divines agreed with them. On the doctrine of justification – which Luther had seen as the central dogma of the Reformation– there were heated disputes. Whereas the majority at Westminster believed that justification involved the imputation of Christ’s perfect life (his ‘active obedience’) to the believer, a vocal minority (led by the learned Presbyterians, Thomas Gataker and Richard Vines) dissented. They worried that this teaching would encourage antinomians. A third issue that divided the divines was millenarianism. The sixteenth-century Reformers had followed Augustine in rejecting the idea of a future millennial rule of the saints on earth, but in the early seventeenth century leading Calvinist intellectuals, including Thomas Brightman and Joseph Mede, had argued that Protestants should expect a coming millennium. This view was endorsed by the venerable prolocutor of the Assembly, William Twisse, and embraced by all the Congregationalist Brethren. It was rejected by the Scots and most English Presbyterians, though many of them still expected a period of latter day glory before the Second Coming of Christ. The Confession was worded so that it could be endorsed by divines who took different positions on these issues.¹⁴

Debating such points and defending Reformed theology against its enemies was a major preoccupation of Puritan divines, and during these decades they published hundreds of doctrinal works.¹⁵ But the rise of the New Model Army and the triumph of the Independents ended hopes of a Presbyterian national church and also prevented the formal adoption to the Westminster Confession. Nevertheless, the lack of an official confession troubled leading Congregationalists like Thomas Goodwin and John Owen, as well as many Presbyterians. Through the course of the 1650s, there were a series of further efforts at creed-making and confessionalisation.¹⁶ In 1652,

Owen and his allies drew up a list of sixteen 'Principles of the Christian Religion' to supplement their Humble Proposals for a new church settlement. These were designed to secure the fundamentals of Trinitarianism and Protestantism, and could have been signed by Arminians, but although the Rump debated the Proposals, they were not formally adopted. The Instrument of Government (1653) called for a new confession, but it also promised toleration for all who 'profess faith in God by Jesus Christ', excluding proponents of Prelacy or Popery. A parliamentary sub-committee was set up in 1654, chaired by Owen, which drew up A New Confession, a statement of faith with twenty articles which was more explicitly Calvinist. Once again, Parliament failed to adopt the confession, and in 1657 the Humble Petition and Advice asked Cromwell that 'a Confession of Faith, to be agreed by your Highness and the Parliament, according to the rule and warrant of the Scriptures, be asserted, held forth, and recommended to the people of these nations'.¹⁷ The following year, Owen and his fellow Congregationalists sought to get the process moving by drawing up a major confessional document. Two hundred delegates assembled at the Savoy Palace, making this the largest clerical assembly since Westminster. They relegated their Congregational principles to an appendix, and there is a good case for seeing the Savoy Confession itself as a semi-official proposal for the national church, since the meeting was organised by Henry Scobell, secretary to the Privy Council. Once again, however, political developments ensured that no official confession was adopted.

CHALLENGING REFORMED ORTHODOXY

Thus despite their hegemony, conservative Calvinists failed to turn England into a confessional state. On the contrary, they struggled to make themselves heard amidst a cacophony of heterodox

voices. The years following the regicide saw the publication of an English translation of the Koran in 1649, the ‘blasphemous’ pamphlets of the Ranters, Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), John Goodwin’s full-scale defence of Arminianism, *Redemption Redeemed* (1651), and the anti-Trinitarian Racovian Catechism. Parliament voted to seize and burn copies of Ranter pamphlets and the Racovian Catechism, and Presbyterian booksellers mounted a sustained campaign against heretical publications. But while the Puritan regime of the 1650s sponsored a draconian campaign of moral reformation, and steadily narrowed the range of newsbooks printed, it had less success restricting the publication of religious thought. England under the Puritans was troubled by culture wars and distinguished by extraordinary intellectual fecundity.¹⁸

The absence of an official confession created genuine confusion about the boundaries of acceptable doctrine. Some of the godly were less than enthusiastic about confessional orthodoxy. Richard Baxter, the bestselling Puritan pastor of the decade, had come to prominence with *The Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), an attack on antinomianism that rejected justification by faith alone. In 1654, Baxter endured a bruising encounter with John Owen and Francis Cheynell in Parliament’s sub-committee for drawing up a new confession of faith. He accused ‘the Over-Orthodoxe Doctors’ of seeking to impose their own understanding of the faith, and advocated a more minimalist basis for church unity – the Bible and (if necessary) the Apostle’s Creed. Owen’s failure to secure a strict confessional settlement allowed figures like Baxter to promote a modified ‘neonomian’ version of Calvinism that emphasised the necessity of good works for salvation and Christ’s death for all mankind not just the elect.¹⁹

Arminianism had been the bugbear of Puritans in the 1630s, but it was now making inroads among the godly themselves. John Goodwin, one of the London’s leading Congregational pastors, forcefully advocated Arminianism (though not under that name) in a series of books and

public disputations. Although he attracted a host of hostile rejoinders, he continued to be held in high regard by moderate Calvinists like Baxter. In 1652, he was even recruited to sign John Owen's Humble Proposals for the reform of the national church, which suggested that Arminianism was now a legitimate option among the godly. Later in the decade, the solidly Calvinist Triers would make it difficult for overt Arminians to enter the parish ministry, but opposition to strict Calvinism now extended well beyond the Laudian clergy.²⁰

This was particularly evident at the University of Cambridge, where the Cambridge Platonists were increasingly influential. A tense exchange of letters between the Vice-Chancellor, Benjamin Whichcote and the Master of Emmanuel College, Anthony Tuckney in 1651 revealed that loyalties to Reformed orthodoxy were weakening. John Goodwin had dedicated *Redemption Redeemed* to Whichcote and the College Masters, but Whichcote refused to take up the cudgels against Arminianism, insisting that liberty of private judgment was 'the foundation of Protestantism'.²¹ The Cambridge Platonists avoided a direct confrontation with Calvinism, but suggested a profound reorientation of English theology. Turning away from Aristotelian scholasticism they found inspiration in the Platonist tradition. Troubled by the stark predestinarianism of Augustine, they looked instead to Greek Fathers like Origen of Alexandria. Drawing on these sources, they developed a philosophical theology and spirituality centred on the goodness of God and the dignity of man. As rational but fallen beings, humans could be restored through Christ, whose incarnation united deity and humanity, making it possible for humans to experience 'deification', as 'partakers of the divine nature'.²²

Among the Episcopal clergy, the tide turned against Calvinism even more decisively. A minority of Episcopal divines would hold tenaciously to Reformed orthodoxy through the later seventeenth century, and these high church Calvinists would become well entrenched at Oxford

University. But the most influential ‘Anglican’ theologians were Henry Hammond and Jeremy Taylor, emphatically Arminian figures. Hammond championed divine right episcopacy in *The Power of the Keyes* (1647), and produced a massive 1000-word biblical commentary, *A Paraphrase and Annotations on all the Books of the New Testament* (1653). Most importantly, in his *Practical Catechism* and elsewhere, he articulated a neo-Arminian doctrine of salvation that owed much to Hugo Grotius. Christ’s death had not paid the exact debt owed by sinners; instead, it allowed God to uphold public retributive justice while offering generous terms in the new covenant. Justification before God was not unconditional or by faith alone (as Luther had asserted); rather the new covenant offered justification to those who sincerely endeavoured to obey the law of Christ.²³ Justification seemed to follow sanctification, a reversal of Luther’s *ordo salutis* (order of salvation). The moralism of Anglican theology was reinforced by a trio of devotional works by Jeremy Taylor that emphasised the imitation of Christ – *The Great Exemplar* (1649), *Holy Living* (1650), and *Holy Dying* (1651). But the most popular exposition of this soteriology was *The Whole Duty of Man* (1657), probably written by Richard Allestree. It was a manual intended to show its readers how ‘to behave themselves so in this world that they may be happy for ever in the next’. Heaven was to be reached through dutiful behaviour.

These challenges to Reformed orthodoxy all came from divines, but to restrict our survey to the clergy would be to fundamentally misrepresent religious thought in the English Revolution.

Theology in the 1640s and 50s was far too important to leave to the ordained ministry. This was the great age of lay theologians. In 1644, one of them – the Londoner John Milton – imagined many ‘pens and heads’ in ‘this vast city’, ‘sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas wherewith to present, as with their homage and their fealty the

approaching Reformation'.²⁴ The lay engagement with theology was extraordinarily intense and creative.

The laity often held particular divines in high esteem, and it would be misleading to set up a false dichotomy between clerical orthodoxy and lay heterodoxy. Reformed orthodoxy was staunchly upheld by various non-clerical writers, including the lawyer William Prynne and the MP Edward Leigh, whose *Treatise of Divinity* (1646) was an able summary of Calvinist doctrine. The President of Cromwell's Council of State, Henry Lawrence, wrote several theological works, including one of the major defences of adult baptism in the 1640s – *Of Baptism* (1646). Like many who advocated believer's baptism, he remained firmly Calvinist in soteriology. The poet Lucy Hutchinson translated the infamous Lucretius, but she also translated a Latin work by John Owen, and her own theological writings reveal someone well versed in Reformed divinity.²⁵

Much lay writing, however, was doctrinally unconventional. The Leveller William Walwyn was devoted to the 'antinomian' theology of 'free justification' that circulated in radical Puritan circles, and it was eloquently presented in his tract *The Power of Love* (1643). Another Leveller, Richard Overton, rejected the traditional notion of the soul's immortality in *Man's Mortalitie* (1643) on the grounds that it owed more to Greek philosophy than to the Hebrew Scriptures. The leading Independent politician, Sir Henry Vane, one of the Revolution's most powerful politicians, published a major theological treatise, *The Retired Man's Meditations* (1655). Vane had been influenced by the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme, and had taken to expounding Scripture to gatherings in his house on the Charing Cross Road (where he was once taken to task by another socially eminent lay theologian, Robert Boyle). His cloudy mysticism bemused contemporaries, but a Calvinist critic claimed that he had deviated from normative Protestant

teaching on ‘Adam’s Fall, Christ’s Person, and Sufferings, Justification, Common and Special Grace; and Many Other Things...’²⁶

Vane’s friend, John Milton, was more conventional in his mode of argument, but equally daring in his doctrines. The blind Milton dictated his systematic theology – *De Doctrina Christiana* - to amanuenses in the 1650s.²⁷ It rejected creation out of nothing, advanced a vitalist conception of nature against body-spirit dualism, denied the immortality of the soul, embraced Arminianism, and defended divorce and polygamy. The treatise was written in Latin and addressed to ‘all the churches of Christ...anywhere among the peoples’, but its immediate English context is important. There is evidence that Milton was preparing it for publication in the late 1650s, when the imposition of confessional orthodoxy was a very real possibility. For Milton, implicit trust in clerical guides was a betrayal of the Reformation; to draw up one’s own systematic theology was a quintessentially Protestant project.

In celebrating Milton’s heresies, much recent scholarship has underplayed his identification with the Reformed tradition. In his own eyes, he was no heretic, but an exemplary Reformed Protestant.²⁸ He employed the logic of the Reformed intellectual, Petrus Ramus, modelled his work on the systematic treatises of the Reformed theologians Ames and Wollebius, and drew his citations from the standard Protestant Latin Bible, the Junius-Tremellius translation. The Bible only was the religion of Protestants, and Milton’s work contained no fewer than eight thousand scriptural references. Though not Trinitarian, he still articulated a high Christology. While the Son was not co-eternal with the Father, he was consubstantial, begotten from the substance of the Father rather than created *ex nihilo*, and worthy of worship. In matters of soteriology, Milton gave an Arminian or antinomian twist to certain doctrines, but he also adopted the forensic, penal account of the atonement that was conventional among Lutherans and Calvinists. *Paradise Lost*

bears clear traces of his heterodoxies, but they were easily overlooked by generations of orthodox readers.

Others offered a more blatant challenge to traditional theology. The soldier-scholar Paul Best and the schoolmaster John Biddle had little use for the Western theological tradition between Nicaea and the Reformation, and they launched bitter attacks on the doctrine of the Trinity, associating it with the corruption of the Church by Antichrist. This aggressive anti-Trinitarianism was intensified by the influence of the Polish Socinians, who combined Biblicism with an aversion for Mystery and a firm faith in the power of Reason. The Socinians denied the pre-existence of the Son; some even refused to worship Christ. But Socinianism was about more than Christology. Its chief theologians had been lawyers, and they saw Christ as the promulgator of a new law, and Christianity as a revelation of new ethical principles. Christ saved men through his teaching and example; he had died as an exemplar, not as a substitute taking the punishment that humanity deserved. Salvation was achieved as humans exercised their free will by obeying Christ's new law. Such was their emphasis on Christ's new law that they displaced the natural law, denied the innate knowledge of God, and endorsed Christian pacifism against just war theory. The challenge of Socinianism preoccupied a variety of thinkers at mid-century, above all John Owen.²⁹

Quakers posed a different kind of challenge. George Fox and the other Quaker itinerants posed as prophets, not intellectuals, and they had little interest in systematising their thought. The first Quaker systematic theology was Robert Barclay's *Apology*, written in the 1670s. Although the Puritan clergy and the Baptists held numerous public disputations with Quakers, these were usually exercises in mutual incomprehension. Nevertheless, the early Quakers had some very definite ideas, ones that ran counter to mainstream Protestantism. They rejected doctrines of

original sin and unconditional predestination in favour of the notion of the 'light within', based on the prologue of John's Gospel which declared that Christ had enlightened every man who came into the world. To orthodox Protestants, the Quakers' unrelenting emphasis on the inner light appeared to downgrade biblical authority, or even Christ's death and resurrection in first-century Palestine. Avoiding Christological disputes, Quakers were non-Trinitarian rather than anti-Trinitarian, but their disinterest in traditional doctrinal categories caused consternation.³⁰

The rise of sects and heresies owed much to the radical potentialities of Protestant biblicism and Puritan populism, as well as to the feverish atmosphere created by the Civil War. The notorious Ranters, for example, flourished in the wake of the regicide and emerged from within the Puritan subculture, taking its emphases on free grace, the Spirit and justification to extreme conclusions.³¹ But equally significant were the voracious and eclectic reading habits of English Protestants, whether elite or plebeian. Elites eagerly devoured the writings of neo-Platonists, Greek Fathers, Dutch Arminians and Polish Socinians, turning them against classic Reformed divinity. The new science and philosophy associated with Galileo and Descartes was used to undermine the scholastic categories of post-Reformation orthodoxy. And against the advice of conservative divines, English readers immersed themselves in a range of esoteric and occultic literature. The autodidact and prophet Thomas Totney built his idiosyncratic theology from a *melange* of Behmenism, hermeticism, angelology, Pythagorean mysticism, alchemy, astrology, heraldry, genealogy and apocryphal scriptures.³² In 1640, Puritan divines had set out to build Jerusalem; by the 1650s, they could be forgiven for thinking that England resembled Babel.

SCIENTIFIC & POLITICAL THOUGHT

But to focus on orthodoxy and its discontents would be underplay the reach of religious thought. It spilled out beyond strictly theological debates to inundate other fields of intellectual discourse. As Patrick Collinson observed, the study of ‘religious’ titles hardly does justice to the influence of religious ideas, for if we turn to almanacs, medical treatises, and cookbooks we find them ‘all saturated with pious vocabulary’.³³ A recent study of printed recipe books under the Protectorate confirms the point, noting that early modern recipes were partly inspired by the alchemical thought of Paracelsus, who sought a universal cure that would end disease and thus remedy the effects of the Fall of Adam.³⁴

The ‘scientific’ projects of the Revolution were often devoted to the same end. Francis Bacon had cited the prophet Daniel who foresaw that in the last days ‘knowledge would increase’, and Baconian experimenters aimed to recover Adamic knowledge of the natural world. There was considerable interest in rediscovering a ‘Paradisical language’ that Adam had spoken in Eden, one that would provide privileged insight into the natures of things. The circle of ‘projectors’ around the German Reformed intellectual, Samuel Hartlib, was strongly influenced by the new Reformed millenarianism, and devised utopian and practical schemes of improvement in education, chemistry, engineering, horticulture, medicine, poor relief and colonization. Another London-based group in the mid-1640s was centred on clerical intellectuals like the Westminster divine and mathematician, John Wallis, the astronomer Seth Ward, and the natural philosopher John Wilkins. In the 1650s, the nucleus of this group was relocated to Oxford, where they were joined by Robert Boyle, who was to become the father of modern chemistry. Boyle was an exceptionally devout layman, who saw natural philosophy as an exercise in doxology - worshipping God by studying the created order. Like other participants in these scientific circles

he favoured an irenic Protestant Christianity. Rather than engaging in detailed points of dispute with other Protestants, these thinkers had two major targets: the traditional scholastic philosophy that impeded the progress of the new science, and the materialist metaphysics that some intellectuals (notably Thomas Hobbes) saw as the corollary of the new philosophy.³⁵

As for political thought, it arguably had less in common with modern political theory than with what we now call political theology. Although there was a rough division of labour between clerical, legal and philosophical writers, the languages of religion, law and philosophy frequently intermingled.³⁶ Political theory was linked to ecclesiology. In the Middle Ages, the arguments advanced by conciliarists and papalists had been redeployed in the civil sphere by imperialists and advocates of representative institutions. In the English Revolution too, contemporaries drew analogies between the government of church and state. Richard Baxter heard Parliamentary soldiers debating ‘church democracy and state democracy’, and he saw a correlation between the populist ecclesiology of the sects and the case for popular revolt against rulers. By 1649, James I’s famous dictum, ‘No bishop, no king’, seemed prophetic.³⁷

Clerical writers played a major role in political debates. In 1642-44, clergy rushed to provide theoretical defences of the Parliamentary or Royalist cause. Resistance theorists like William Bridge, Charles Herle and Samuel Rutherford were ranged against Royalists like Henry Hammond, Henry Ferne and Griffith Williams. They debated the implications of natural law theory, with Parliamentarians building on the traditional scholastic notion that mankind was naturally free from subjection so that government was created by a contract between king and people. While matters of legality were primarily the domain of lawyers, Puritan divines were keen to insist on the constitutional grounds for Parliament’s war – it was being waged to defend the church by law established.³⁸ But they also expended a great deal of energy debating

precedents from Scripture and Church history. Resistance theorists appealed to Old Testament revolts against tyrants and recent Calvinist risings; their critics pointed to the passive suffering of Christ and the non-violence of the primitive Church. In political sermons, providential and apocalyptic ideas often came to the fore, as preachers depicted God at work in contemporary events, even bringing history to its climax with the overthrow of the civil and ecclesiastical tyranny of Papal Antichrist. Biblical arguments remained prominent in 1649, when regicides cited Old Testament warrants for capital punishment – the Noahic rule that murderers forfeited their own lives (Genesis 9:5-6), and the Mosaic teaching that a land would not be purged of its blood guilt until the ‘man of blood’ was put to death (Numbers 35:33). In the Engagement controversy that followed the regicide, divines like Francis Rous and John Dury appealed to the doctrine of Providence and to Romans 13 (on obedience to rulers), to justify submission to the new regime.³⁹

Theological considerations were also important for the Levellers and their offspring, the True Levellers (or Diggers). The Leveller account of natural equality and freedom had theistic foundations. All humanity had been made in God’s image and given dominion over creation. According to Lilburne, this meant that they were ‘by nature all equal and alike in power, dignity, authority and majesty – none of them having (by nature) any authority, dominion or magisterial power, one over or above another’. Civil authority was established by ‘mutual agreement or consent’, and hence subject to strict limitations. Even Leveller women could justify assertive petitioning on the ground that ‘we are assured of our creation in the image of God, and of an interest in Christ equal unto men’.⁴⁰ The Levellers also stressed the duties of practical Christianity, citing passages from the Hebrew prophets and the Letter of James about justice and mercy towards the poor and downtrodden. Such texts inspired the Digger Gerrard Winstanley

too, but his political theology was more innovative in its method. He reconceptualised Christian doctrines of Creation, Fall and Redemption from the standpoint of the landless - the earth (he argued) was created as a common treasury; man had been corrupted by selfishness and private property; Christ was now restoring the common ownership of the earth.⁴¹

The resurgence of republican thought after 1649 also had a significant religious dimension.

While republican theorists looked to the classical republics of the ancient world and Renaissance Italy, they also turned to the Old Testament. Historians of political thought have often overlooked works on the Hebrew republic, but Eric Nelson argues that this was among the most important genres of European political writing in 'the Biblical Century'. In the 1650s, English republicans drew on rabbinic commentaries which opened up new perspectives on biblical texts. In the Mosaic land laws and the institution of the Jubilee, James Harrington found a warrant for the redistribution of property. In I Samuel 8, Milton found the basis for an exclusivist republicanism that depicted monarchy as a departure from God's will.⁴² In contrast to Harrington, Milton and other godly republicans stressed the necessity of civic virtue and godly citizens. They also incorporated New Testament themes into their political thought. Unlike Luther, Milton argued that the Pauline doctrine of Christian Liberty had political ramifications – Christ came to free mankind from temporal as well as spiritual tyranny. Christian politics must begin from Christ's critique of the 'princes of the Gentiles' who lorded it over their subjects.⁴³

The relationship of church and state was a matter of contention among republicans, as it was among their contemporaries. Indeed, the role of the magistrate in matters of religion was one of the most hotly contested issues across the revolutionary era. While Harrington favoured a national civil religion, Milton opposed the very idea of state churches. On this, Milton was out on a limb. Advocates of magisterial reformation – i.e. mainstream Protestants – emphasised the

necessity of an established church. Magistrates were the ‘keepers of both tables’ of the Ten Commandments, and responsible for policing offences against God as well as against neighbours. Support for religious uniformity remained strong among the clergy and many laity too. Major treatises were written in defence of religious coercion, including works by the English lawyer William Prynne and the Scottish theologian Samuel Rutherford. But among magisterial Protestants there was a fierce dispute about the relations between church and state. Whereas Prynne was staunchly Erastian, Rutherford was emphatically clericalist – and once again, both penned treatises to prove their case. A similar dispute arose among Royalists as the King contemplated reaching a deal with Scottish Presbyterians and English Independents. Assertors of exclusive divine right episcopacy like John Bramhall were adamant that the king must not compromise on church government and liturgy. But they were confronted by those who argued that the king’s supremacy in matters of religion allowed him to determine the government of the church.

Among these anti-clericalist Royalists the most radical, least representative and most brilliant was Thomas Hobbes. He appears to have written his masterpiece *Leviathan* (1651) in the wake of the regicide. It began as a powerful indictment of rebellion against kings and a compelling argument for the undivided sovereignty of the monarch over civil and religious affairs, though its ‘Review and Conclusion’ appended conciliatory comments about the new Independent regime, and it has been seen as a contribution to the case for submission during the Engagement Controversy.⁴⁴ The first half of his *magnum opus* argued from natural reason, seeking to resolve the problem of religious war by appealing to universal natural laws that required men to submit to their political sovereign, whether they agreed with him or not. The second half (Books III and IV) was devoted to questions of theology and ecclesiology, and here Hobbes presented a

sweeping critique of churchly orthodoxies. His radical theology had two principal drivers. The first was his materialist reading of the new science. For Hobbes, the mechanical philosophy was simply incompatible with metaphysical dualism. There were no ‘incorporeal substances’ – human souls were material and could not survive as disembodied spirits; ghosts were a fiction; angels were not real beings; even God was corporeal. The second driver was political – his single-minded belief in the necessity of undivided sovereignty. This led him to deny the clericalist claims made by *jure divino* Papalists, Prelatists and Presbyterians. In the past, God had ruled Israel as a theocracy; in the future, he would rule his kingdom on earth; but in the present, the church had no political power. Churchmen might teach if tolerated or authorised by the magistrate, but only rulers could make law. Indeed, legally speaking, the magistrate was the sole interpreter of Scripture, and his subjects must conform outwardly to his religious laws for the sake of peace, regardless of their own religious beliefs. Hobbes had no time for martyrs or conscientious objectors. On this, he went far beyond traditional Protestant Erastianism, and was radically out of step with the Independents whom he praised in his ‘Review and Conclusion’.⁴⁵

Although ‘magisterial Independents’ like John Owen and Philip Nye believed that the magistrate had the power to maintain a state religion, they wanted their own ‘gathered’ churches to be self-governing. The state should tolerate non-parochial congregations, as long as they were peaceable, Protestant and Trinitarian. More radical members of the Independent coalition, by contrast, flatly rejected the concept of ‘State Religion’ and denied the magistrate’s regulatory and coercive power in matters of religion. There were pragmatic and philosophical arguments for this position, but biblical and theological arguments were particularly important. Under the Old Testament, reasoned writers like Roger Williams, John Goodwin and John Milton, church and state had been unified; but in the Church Age, there was to be a ‘severing’ of church and state.

Churches were voluntary associations, supported by gifts not compulsory tithes; the task of magistrates was wholly civil, for it concerned ‘bodies and goods’ not souls. This view was embraced by Levellers, Baptists and Quakers, but it was an extreme position, and Henry Stubbe admitted that ‘Sectarian Toleration’ had few supporters.⁴⁶

LEGACIES

Historians have often pronounced the English Revolution a failure, but the religious thought of the period was to have a seminal influence on later Protestantism. The Westminster Assembly’s Shorter Catechism was memorised by generations of Presbyterian children. The Westminster Confession was adopted by the Church of Scotland, and formed the basis for later confessions by Congregationalists and Particular Baptists. For millions of Presbyterians (including many in South Korea) it remains an official statement of faith. Similarly, the writings of John Owen became a touchstone of Protestant orthodoxy. Frequently referred to in the eighteenth century, they were republished in twenty-four volumes in the 1850s and then again in the 1960s. Since then, there have been over forty PhD theses written on Owen’s theology.⁴⁷ Richard Baxter’s bestsellers – *The Saints Everlasting Rest* (1650), *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), and *Call to the Unconverted* (1658) – quickly attained classic status and went through countless editions in England, America, the Netherlands and elsewhere. Among Anglicans, the writings of Henry Hammond, Jeremy Taylor and the Cambridge Platonists achieved the same kind of acclaim, helping to forge a post-Calvinist identity for the established Church. The neo-Arminian soteriology popularised by Richard Allestree and later restated by Archbishop Tillotson (a Cambridge academic in the 1650s) would become the dominant understanding of salvation in the

English parish, where the emphasis on dutiful behaviour crowded out the Puritan demand for conversion.⁴⁸

The Revolution's radical religious thinkers had a mixed reception. The theological reflections of William Walwyn, Gerrard Winstanley and Abiezer Coppe were soon forgotten, and only rescued from obscurity by twentieth-century scholars. Milton's systematic theology was first published in 1820s, and has attracted little attention beyond academia. By contrast, the writings of George Fox (especially his retrospective *Journal* looking back on the 1650s) became foundational for the Quaker ethos. If we consider the critical influence of later Quakers on antislavery, pacifism and even the early movement for women's rights, it becomes clear that the rise of this sect was one of the Revolution's lasting legacies. Radical Protestant questioning of mainstream orthodoxy could feed into the Enlightenment in surprising ways. The Quaker, Samuel Fisher, who had written a witty and learned attack on Protestant Biblicism, may have influenced the biblical criticism of Benedict Spinoza, since the two seem to have collaborated on a translation of pamphlets by Margaret Fell. Another Quaker in the Netherlands, the merchant Benjamin Furly, kept a remarkable library of radical Protestant works (many from the 1640s and 1650s) at his house in Rotterdam, where he hosted an intellectual circle that included John Locke and Pierre Bayle. *A Discourse of the Torments of Hell* (1660), a tract by the Particular Baptist Samuel Richardson which denied the doctrine of eternal conscious torment, was translated and republished as *L'Enfer Detruit* (1769) by the atheist circle of the Baron D'Holbach. The impact of Socinianism would also persist. John Locke had been educated at Christ Church, Oxford, when John Owen was Dean, but by the late seventeenth century Locke's theology would look suspiciously Socinian; for other writers, it was a small step from Socinianism to Deism.

The natural philosophy and political theology of the revolutionary years also proved seminal. The scientific circles of Hartlib, Wilkins and Boyle were the forerunners of the Royal Society founded in 1662. Wilkins and Ward became bishops, while Boyle emerged as Europe's leading experimental scientist, as well as a lay theologian who wrote works of apologetics designed to reconcile natural philosophy with classical theism. The materialism and heterodoxy of Hobbes' *Leviathan* offered a very different account of the theological ramifications of the new science, and though it came under constant critical fire in the later seventeenth century, the work was repeatedly exploited by Deists and other thinkers of the radical Enlightenment. In political thought, the Royalist case against armed resistance weighed heavily with later High Church Anglicans, who remembered 'King Charles the Martyr' and insisted that subjects must imitate the passive obedience of Christ. Their principles caused a crisis at the Glorious Revolution – non-Jurors left the Church rather than swear allegiance to William and Mary, while others took comfort in the fiction that James II had abdicated. In the American Revolution, High Church Episcopalians would form the core of the Loyalist movement. Their opponents drew on the radical Whig tradition built on the collected works of Milton and Harrington published by John Toland at the end of the seventeenth century. In *Common Sense*, the Deist Tom Paine even made cynical use of Milton's biblical argument against kingship, knowing it would resonant with his Reformed Protestant readership. Milton's case for the separation of church and state also enjoyed greater success in America than in Britain, and the writings of Roger Williams were rediscovered by American Baptists in the later eighteenth century. In the United States, a Miltonic fusion of radical Protestantism, disestablishment and republicanism would become mainstream ideology. This was the last and greatest of the English Revolution's posthumous triumphs.

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