# Introduction

# 1     The trials of the chosen peoples: recent interpretations of protestantism and national identity in Britain and Ireland

*Tony Claydon and Ian McBride*

On 29 January 1689, the constitutional convention which had as-
sembled in London to discuss the state of the nation after the flight of
James II reached a moment of extraordinary consensus. A body which
was deeply split between whigs and tories, which contained both future
Jacobites and future ministers of William III, and which would continue
to argue for two more weeks before deciding what to do about the
disappearance of the monarch, unanimously agreed a resolution pro-
posed by Colonel John Birch in its lower house and sent up to the
assembled peers as soon as it had been approved. The resolution stated
that 'it hath been found by experience, to be inconsistent with the safety
and welfare of this Protestant Kingdom to be governed by a Popish
Prince'.[1] The convention thus united its very disparate members in an
unequivocal, and perhaps the first official, recognition of the essential
protestantism of its nation. Through the wording of the resolution,
people of every political persuasion had accepted that their realm was
something so closely bound to the reformed faith that neither its
interests, nor its constitution, nor its very identity, could be conceived
without reference to that religion.

    Throughout the period considered by this volume, this sense of the
fundamental protestantism of Britain and Ireland was to have far-
reaching consequences. To take only English constitutional examples,
the desire to preserve the protestant nation was to produce a succession
crisis in the years 1678–83, to legitimate the deposition of the king in
1688, to justify the union of England and Scotland in 1707, to import a
foreign dynasty in 1714, to fuel a continuing crisis over catholic emanci-
pation between the 1750s and 1829, and to encourage the electoral
revolution of 1832 as anti-popish politicians sought a more 'popular'
legislature that might defend their faith. Consequently, it is perhaps

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[1] *Journals of the House of Commons*, X, 15; *Journals of the House of Lords*, XIV, 110.

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superfluous to open this collection with a justification for exploring the
links between religion and national identity in the late Stuart and
Hanoverian kingdoms. We clearly cannot understand how contem-
porary British and Irish people thought about themselves or their
nations without considering their faith. Yet some wider reflection on the
prominence of British protestant nationalism within recent accounts of
the 'long eighteenth century' may still be useful, if only because this
subject has been so closely related to other historiographic develop-
ments. Because analysis of the links between British faith and nationality
has had its origins in other areas of scholarly endeavour, it is important
to look at how these other influences may have defined problems,
shaped methodology, and perhaps imported distortions, into this field.

## I

Perhaps the most important context for the recent study of 'Britishness'
and protestantism has been the increasing interest in national identities
across the historical profession. Since the 1960s, there has been an
outpouring of works considering nationality, which have ranged across a
wide variety of time periods, geographical areas and scholarly ap-
proaches.[2] Politically, the reason for this may seem obvious. After the
containment of nationality as a contemporary problem after 1945,
nationalism has erupted back into popular consciousness. In Europe
alone, the east of the continent has been extensively remodelled by
national movements, whilst in the west established nations have had to
consider their relationship with the supra-national European Union,
and have been challenged by regionalism from within. Yet whilst this
explanation for the upsurge in scholarly interest is important, the fact
that historians moved to analyse nationality somewhat before its political
significance became clear suggests that there was more than this behind
their interest .

Here the most vital change seems to have been the redescription of
national identity as something constructed rather than natural. Over the
last few decades, a number of historians have begun to explore the
historical processes through which people came to conceive of them-
selves as belonging to a national group. For these scholars, there was
nothing fundamental, organic or given about a person's national iden-

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[2] Perhaps the most quoted of these studies have been Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and
states* (1977); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and
spread of nationalism* (revd edn, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford,
1983); Anthony Smith, *National identity* (Reno, 1991). Some of the more influential
works in the field have been collected in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds.,
*Nationalism* (Oxford, 1994).

tity. Rather, nationality had to be *created* as particular types of social and cultural interaction encouraged people to 'imagine' a national community where previously there had been only unrelated groups or individuals. Within this approach, the vital moment in the formation of identity came when individuals came to view an amorphous mass of people (most of whom they would never meet) as sharing a common history, destiny, culture or interests. This would commonly happen as a popular press, or mass political organisations, started encouraging their audiences to think of themselves as a nation sharing essential characteristics.[3] Obviously, such an approach to the study of identity had the excitement of novelty. It represented a break with older traditions of national history writing, which had never done much to question the origins or coherence of the units with which they dealt. More profoundly, however, it opened up a whole new field of historical scholarship by making nationality a subject of historical analysis. As long as nations were assumed to be natural divisions of mankind, then there would be no need to ask what processes had led to their formation. If, however, they were constructed, or 'imagined' communities, there was work to be done establishing exactly how they had been constructed, what forces had encouraged people to think of themselves in particular ways, and what political, social or economic interests might have been furthered by their promotion. To a large extent, it was the simple possibility of doing such work which drove interest in nationality, and which has contributed to recent analyses of the role of protestantism within 'Britishness'.

The other main spur to investigation in this field has been a general revival in the history of religion. In the past couple of decades, the study of the faith of historical actors has become more common and more varied in approach, and has moved out of the ghetto of ecclesiastical history to which it had been long confined.[4] The reasons for this renaissance are not entirely clear. Possibly the re-emergence of religion as source of dispute within contemporary conflicts has been a factor; but again, historiographic trends may hold more answers. Here, perhaps, interest has been sparked by the decline of traditional 'progressive' interpretation of the past, such as Anglo-American 'whiggism' or

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[3] Anderson, *Imagined communities*, did most to popularise this approach.
[4] Some of the most strident claims for the centrality of religion within the period of this volume would include: Michael Finlayson, *Historians, puritanism and the English revolution* (Toronto, 1983); Mark Goldie, Tim Harris and Paul Seaward, eds., *The politics of religion in restoration England* (Oxford, 1990), especially the introduction; Tony Claydon, *William III and the godly revolution* (Cambridge, 1996); J. C. D.Clark, *English society, 1688–1832* (Cambridge, 1985); Clark, *The language of liberty, 1660–1832* (Cambridge, 1993).

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Marxism. Within these old 'teleological' traditions, religious faith
tended to be seen as a brake on the natural and unfolding development
of mankind. It was a bulwark of conservative structures which would be
swept away by an emerging liberal society or proletarian power, and it
was treated as a irrationality which would be transcended by the
intellectual enlightenment which was a central assumption of these
interpretations. At best, therefore, 'teleological' scholarship ignored
religion as irrelevant to the forward-looking forces which created new
historical situations. At worst it denounced faith as a 'false conscious-
ness' which distracted historical actors from their true vocations. Once,
however, 'whiggism' and Marxism began to run into trouble (and their
discreditation has been the main feature of historical scholarship in the
later twentieth century), the significance of religion began to be reap-
praised. 'Revisionist' historians revelled in the new-found importance of
a factor which had been overlooked by traditional interpretations, and
some also found that they were forced to take faith seriously as it
became the only explanation for developments which had traditionally
been accounted for by liberal or proletarian advance, but which the
revisionists themselves had ensured could no longer be analysed in these
ways.[5] As a result, new areas of inquiry were opened up. Political, social,
cultural and intellectual historians began to draw on the conclusions of
their ecclesiastical colleagues, and greater efforts were made to under-
stand the details of theological positions and to describe how faith
moulded the worldview of historical actors.

Investigations of British protestant nationality have stood at the
intersection of these broad historiographic trends. In part this has
explained the popularity and dynamism of this particular part of the
discipline. Scholars looking at the relationship between protestantism
and Britishness have been fired by the excitement of wider investigations
of national identity and religion: the contributions to this collection
show how the field has been enriched by comparisons with other
nationalities, by general theories of identity formation, and by increas-
ingly subtle understanding of religious awareness, motivation and divi-
sion. However, whilst such connections to more general trends
demonstrate the crucial position of studies of British protestantism
within current historical enterprise, they also point to some possible
dangers with the approaches which have been adopted. In borrowing
ideas from the wider interest in faith and nationality, historians of

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[5] For one example of this, contrast Conrad Russell's retrospective collection of essays,
*Unrevolutionary England, 1603–1642* (1990) which stressed early Stuart political
stability, with his later work, *The causes of the English civil war* (Oxford, 1990) which
depended on long-term religious instabilities to explain the breakdown of 1642.

eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland may have picked up analytical weaknesses along with strengths.

Briefly, there appear to be three main problems which the study of Britishness and protestantism shares with the wider historiographies. First, there is a preoccupation with 'the other'. As historians have tried to understand how collections of individuals came to imagine themselves as nations, they have borrowed the bi-polar approach of many anthropologists and literary critics, and have tended to concentrate on that which the national group has been defined against. They have argued that men and women can most easily be brought to think of themselves as a national community when they can be united in rejecting some external set of people, and so have examined how these outsiders, these 'others', are constructed as hostile aliens.[6] This interest in 'the other' can be seen in almost all works on identity formation.[7] As we shall see, it has affected the study of British and Irish nationalities through interest in the depiction of the catholic, continental and exotic peoples who were conceived as threatening the island nations. Yet whilst this approach has deepened our understanding of community formation (it is probably impossible to form any sense of identity without *some* rejection of things thought to lie outside), overconcentration on 'others' may have deflected attention from other features of nationality. For example, nationality tends to be depicted as almost entirely negative and exclusive within recent accounts. It is defined chiefly by describing what 'others' have been rejected in its formation, and rather less attention is paid to its 'positive' aspects – values which the community believes it embodies and in which it takes pride. Similarly, an approach centred on the 'other' suggests that national feeling is incompatible with more 'universal' sympathies embracing wider communities. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that the relationship between nationality and universalism is more complex than this. Some national identities (for example, the old testament Jewish, and the modern American) include a sense of mission to the whole human race, and as several pieces in this volume make clear, the same was true of 'British' protestant identity in the late Stuart and Hanoverian period.[8]

[6] Among the most influential works have been Frederick Barth, ed., *Ethnic groups and boundaries* (Bergen, 1969); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978); and Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: the making of France and Spain* (Berkeley, 1989).

[7] Most relevantly here, 'otherness' is central to Linda Colley, 'Britishness and otherness: an argument', *JBS*, 31 (1992), 309–29.

[8] For later Hebrew internationalism see the texts of later old testament prophets, e.g. *Isaiah* 49:6. For an interesting discussion of the connections between nationalism and universalism, and their application to America, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, *God land: reflections on religion and nationalism* (1988).

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A second general weakness of recent scholarly trends has been to suggest that national feeling is something relatively modern. Because attention has shifted to the *creation* of identities, many have been drawn to study the pre-conditions for this fabrication, and have concluded that real nationality was impossible before such recent developments as a literate and press-reading population, or mass political movements. If large numbers of people are to imagine themselves a community, the argument runs, modern means of communication and politicisation are essential. As a result, nationality was seen emerging no earlier than the late eighteenth century. If some vague feeling of nationhood was admitted before that time, its conversion into the more significant nation-al*ism* (usually conceived as a mass movement demanding that political structures reflect the autonomy of the nation) was always delayed until the era of the French revolution.[9] Within British historiography, this tendency has been seen in studies which argued for novel forms of identity in the Georgian era, and which dismissed earlier feelings of nationality as politically unimportant.[10] However, while it is certain that the expansion of popular politics in the eighteenth century affected the nature of nationality, it is far less clear that true national identity, or even nationalism, was unsustainable before this time. As contributions here demonstrate, a sense of nationality – even a politically significant one – seems to have been well established in the British realm by the mid-Stuart period.[11] Either the Britannic islands developed the popular press and political movements necessary to sustain national feeling much earlier than the French revolutionary era, or other, much older, cultural forms such as chronicles, sermons, liturgies, ballads and cere-monies proved as capable of propagating nationality and allowing people to imagine themselves part of a wider community.[12]

[9] See E. J. Hobsbawn, *Nations and nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990); John Brueilly, *Nationalism and the state* (Manchester, 1982), p. 4; Hans Kohn, *The idea of nationalism: a study of its origin and background* (New York, 1945), p. 1; Gellner, *Nations*, pp. 39–40; Anderson, *Imagined communities*, p. 11.

[10] For the origins of politically significant nationalism in the eighteenth century, see Gerald Newman, *The rise of English nationalism: a cultural history, 1740–1830* (1987); and to a lesser extent, Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992).

[11] See also, Peter Furtado, 'National pride in seventeenth-century England', in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: the making and unmaking of British national identity* (3 vols., 1989), I, pp. 44–56; Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: five roads to modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), ch. 1.

[12] For such media see David Cressy, *Bonfires and bells: national memory and the protestant calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (1989); Richard Helgerson, *Forms of nationhood: the Elizabethan writing of England* (1992); John N. King, *Tudor royal iconography* (Princeton, 1989). For early national identities, see Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and communities in western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford, 1984); Anthony D. Smith, The *ethnic origins of nations* (Oxford, 1984); John A. Armstrong, *Nations*

Finally, whilst study of British protestantism and nationality has benefited greatly from the renaissance in religious history, this surge in interest has also had dangers. The most pressing of these is a tendency to over-play faith as a historical dynamic. So enthusiastic have 'revisionist' scholars been for new, theological, explanations of developments, that they have tended to concentrate upon them to the exclusion of other factors. In our area, this temptation is evident in what one contributor describes as a tendency to view protestantism as constituting (rather than being merely a constituent in) national identity.[13] In fact, national identities are always more complex and multifaceted than this view suggests. As the pieces here demonstrate, protestantism was only ever one element in British nationalities, and it always interacted with beliefs about the constitution, race, language, and relations between local and European culture. Thus, as with identity, so with religion. Study of 'British' protestant nationality benefits greatly from its central position within current scholarship; but this position brings hazards as well as rewards, and historians must be careful to select very carefully from the wider academic projects.

## II

Having looked at the general state of the field, it is important to focus attention more narrowly on the relationship between protestantism and national identity in Britain and Ireland between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. What precise approaches have been adopted here over the past years; what progress has been made; and what contribution can be made by the essays within this volume? In answering these questions, it can be useful to separate England from the wider entity of Britain and Ireland. Not only do historians of England tend to form a separate (generally anglo-centric) school from students of the whole archipelago, but the study of English history in isolation allows examination of certain trends which can get lost in the complexities of multinational interaction with which wider 'British' scholars have become involved.

In England, the starting point for most discussion of religion and national identity has been a model of their relationship which has placed the reformed faith at the very centre of English feeling. This model was

*before nationalism* (Chapel Hill, 1982). For the emergence of an English public sphere in the late seventeenth century, see Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (English trans., Cambridge, 1992); Steven Pincus, '"Coffee politicians does create": coffee houses and restoration political culture', *JMH*, 67:4 (1985), 807–34.

[13] See below, p. 93.

derived from work by historians of the Tudor era (particularly from the studies of William Haller on John Foxe's 'Book of martyrs') which argued that the sixteenth-century reformation had produced a peculiar feeling of national election because it allowed people to see themselves as uniquely blessed in their possession of the true, protestant creed.[14] This paradigm was carried forward into the eighteenth century by a number of other historians, most notably Linda Colley, who – whilst not accepting the model uncritically – used it at least as a starting point for discussion.[15] Given the influence of this interpretation on studies of late Stuart and Hanoverian England, it is worth examining in some detail.

At base, the interpretation which scholars of the eighteenth century borrowed from Tudor specialists was very simple. It revolved around two central assumptions, both of which suggested that nationality was a sub-set of protestantism. The first of these assumptions was that the early modern sense of Englishness was founded on a profound horror of a papist 'other'. According to this view, the dominant sentiment among Tudor Englishmen was hostility to Roman catholicism, and to the panoply of associated conspiracies against godly protestantism which contemporaries labelled 'popery'. In this interpretation, the English saw popery as the very antithesis of virtue. It was an anti-christian perversion of the true faith which became a convincing explanation of all misfortunes, evils, instabilities and oppressions. Within this worldview, 'Englishness' emerged in opposition to popish horrors. The English could see themselves as profoundly fortunate that they (almost uniquely within Europe) had escaped the bondage of catholicism; and they could view other nations as more completely alien, since they were not only distant and unfamiliar, but essentially corrupted. They were thus given a heightened, ideological sense of the borders of their nation; and were provided with a sense of a national character which had rejected the sensuous debauchery, priestly persecution and monarchical tyranny which were thought to be the defining vices of catholicism.[16]

The second assumption behind the 'Tudor' model of protestantism and nationality, was that the English thought of themselves as an 'elect nation'. In this view, early modern Englishmen's sense of themselves as the unique adherents of God's true faith, led them to believe that they were the successors of the old testament Jews, and that they enjoyed a

[14] William Haller, *Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs' and the elect nation* (1963).
[15] Colley, *Britons*, ch. 1.
[16] Peter Lake, 'Anti-popery: the structure of a prejudice', in Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, eds., *Conflict in early Stuart England* (1989), pp. 72–106; Robert Clifton, 'Fear of popery', in Conrad Russell, ed., *The origins of the English civil war* (1973), pp. 144–67; C. Z. Weiner, 'The beleaguered isle: a study of Elizabethan and early Jacobean anti-catholicism', *P&P*, 51 (1971), 27–52.

similarly privileged relationship with the deity. Noticing the parallels between the Hebrews' situation surrounded by unbelieving pagans, and their own position in a largely popish continent, the English came to think that they too were God's 'chosen people'. They came to believe they were the objects of God's special love; they thought that they too received his special care and protection; and they argued that they too had entered into a peculiar covenant with heavenly powers, in which they gained providential blessing in return for their continuing efforts to sustain and extend true, protestant worship. This sense of divine election added three main features to those produced by the basic drive of anti-popery. First, it bred a feeling of uniqueness. The English came to feel that they alone had been favoured by God, and had been singled out from the general run of mankind. Second, 'election' produced a peculiar vision of national history, in which the English began to interpret their national past as a re-run of the old testament. In this vision, the English story – an analogy for the Israelite story – was a series of trials of a chosen people. It was a record of God's tests of his children, of his leading them into temptations, of his judgements, and – most importantly – of his sudden providential deliverances in the face of terrible danger. Finally, the English sense of election fed an enhanced sense of destiny. Combining the feeling of uniqueness, and the peculiar view of the national past, Englishmen came to believe that the culmination of God's plans for them would be pre-eminence. Once they had come through their trials, the chosen people would be raised to a privileged position at God's right hand.[17]

This, then, was the basic model of a protestant national identity which scholars of the eighteenth century borrowed from the early modern period. In the recent spate of studies of Georgian national identity, it has played a large part. In the work of Linda Colley, for example, notions of patriotic anti-popery and elect nationhood have loomed large. The reason for this easy borrowing of the 'Tudor' model has been a glut of evidence that eighteenth-century Englishmen did in fact continue to view their world as their predecessors had done. For example, in this volume Colin Haydon demonstrates how common anti-popery was in the eighteenth century and how it was bound up with the identity of contemporary people – especially enabling them to recognise what was foreign. As Haydon shows, Georgian men and women were reminded of the 'outlandishness' of Roman catholicism (the territorial nature of the adjective is significant) through a host of cultural forms.

[17] For aspects of these beliefs, see William Lamont, *Godly rule: politics and religion, 1603–1660* (1969); Paul Christianson, *The reformers and Babylon: English apocalyptic visions* (Toronto, 1978).