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# The Seventeenth Century

BETWEEN THE ACCESSIONS OF JAMES I IN 1603 AND William and Mary in 1689, Englishmen planted all the North American colonies (save Georgia), which in 1776 declared themselves to be the United States of America. The religious map of the colonies in 1689 resembled Joseph's coat with its multiple hues and colors. In some colonies the state compelled obedience to one official church; in others it was stripped of all power over its citizens' consciences. There were colonies in which religion was regulated in some places but not in others. And there were colonies in which the brand of religion supported by the state varied from place to place. In still other colonies the state refrained from regulating religion but signaled its intention to do so in the future.

Those colonies settled after the English Civil War of the 1640s benefited from the "new" idea of toleration, which emerged during that conflict. Prewar colonies, on the other hand, were defiantly intolerant, practicing a church–state policy – coercive uniformity – that was more than a thousand years old, traceable as far back as Christianity's ascendency in the Roman Empire in the fourth century A.D.

The traditional, coercive policy was carried to North America in 1607 by the settlers of Virginia. At that time there were three major

religious groups in England: Anglicans, Puritans, and Catholics (whose influence had plummeted since 1559). A fourth group, no more than a speck of the English population, renounced all the nation's churches and separated itself from what it regarded as the pervasive religious rottenness by fleeing to the Netherlands; in 1620 some of these "separatists" sailed, as the Pilgrims, to Plymouth, Massachusetts. Although they were often at each others throats, Anglicans, Puritans, and Catholics agreed on a few ecclesiastical issues, one being the relationship of the state to the church. All believed that the state must assist the orthodox church in its jurisdiction, promoting its doctrines and suppressing dissent from them by force, if necessary.

Everyone in England assumed that state–church cooperation was ancient and "universal," stretching back, according to one writer, to "the Infancy of Civil Society." "Fathers of Families," this early anthropologist theorized, "who always executed the Office of Priesthood, when they advanced or were called up, to the Administration of public affairs, carried the sacred Office with them into the Magistracy . . . and continued to execute both Functions in Person." No one doubted that "all States of all Times . . . had an established religion." In his famous plea for toleration, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (London, 1644), Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, asserted that the alliance of church and state was a constant in human history and that it had constantly repressed dissent. "It is true," observed Williams, "that all magistrates do this: viz., encourage and protect the church or assembly of worshipers which they judge to be true and approve of; but not permitting other consciences than their own. It has come to pass in all ages."

There was no need for Englishmen to rummage around in the mists of prehistory to discover the origins of church–state cooperation.

They knew their Roman history and knew that during the Roman Empire "state and religion were so mixed together that it was impossible not only to have the idea of a conflict between the two but even to distinguish the one from the other." The Emperor embodied in his person the union of church and state, for he was both the chief magistrate and the chief priest, the *pontifex maximus*. The Roman practice of aligning the state with the church manifested itself as soon as Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Only two years after his decisive victory at the Milvian Bridge (312 A.D.), Constantine and his lieutenants began "the tradition of persecution in the interests of orthodox conformity which was to mark the Christian Roman Empire and therefore its successor states, the medieval nations." The rationale for the state's employing force on behalf of the Roman Church, not always evident during the so-called Dark Ages and during periods when rogues and secular men headed the church, was the salvation of souls.

In striving to save souls, both the church and state were operating within the framework of what has been called the doctrine of exclusive salvation. This doctrine posited that there was an absolute truth necessary for salvation, that this truth was knowable, and that a particular church knew it. With unshakeable confidence, the Roman Church asserted that it was the "one universal church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation." The doctrine of exclusive salvation assumed, as every reader of the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans knew, that the office of the civil magistrate was instituted by God, a divine action that was considered to have authorized secular authorities to put their resources, including force, at the disposal of their clerical brethren to guide the body politic along the true path to salvation and to prevent competitors from leading the flock down the false path to perdition. The result

of the doctrine was, ideally, uniformity of faith – for if all were to be saved, all must believe the same truth – and persecution of dissent. "The case for theological persecution, is unanswerable," wrote a distinguished expositor of the doctrine, "if we admit the fundamental supposition that one faith is known to be true and necessary for salvation."

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century – Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and their associates – agreed with the Church of Rome that there was a true faith and were certain that they knew it and had rescued it from centuries of chicanery and obfuscation by the Pope and his minions. The reformers also agreed with the Church of Rome about the proper relationship between church and state. With Calvin, they held "that it is the business of government to maintain true doctrine and right worship and to suppress heresy by force." Calvin and his followers insisted on this doctrine so inflexibly that a scholar has compared them to the imperious Bishop Hildebrand, who became the mighty Pope Gregory VII in 1073. The Calvinist position has, consequently, been called the "Hildebrandine theory of the relation of church and state."

Calvinism spread from Geneva to the British Isles from the middle of the sixteenth century onward and became the dominant theological persuasion in Scotland and England (at least until the Laudean reforms of the 1630s). With it came, with modifications, the doctrine of exclusive salvation, which a scholar once claimed was "no longer tenable," in seventeenth-century England, as a "belief by minds open to reason." "Which perhaps most minds were not," the scholar immediately added, hastily reversing himself and offering as evidence of the prevailing mindset the words of a divine who in the 1630s denounced speculations about Catholics being saved as a "miserable weakness." In the 1640s, Parliament, under the control

of Presbyterians, favored the "extirpation of heresie, schisme and whatsoever shall be found contrary to sound doctrine" so that "infallible and knowne truth" might prevail and promote the salvation of the English people. Theological truth was cheap in seventeenth-century England. The often humble folks who populated the unconventional and, to many, unsettling sects, which mushroomed in the 1640s, were "dogmatically certain that they alone possessed the truth," although, unlike the Calvinists, they did not want the state to impose it. At the opposite end of the intellectual scale, the deep thinker and political philosopher John Locke was not reluctant to assert in his *Letter concerning toleration* (1689), that there was a "true religion," as his enemies maliciously reminded him.

Locke's enemies were High Church Anglicans who argued into the eighteenth century that the state was justified in using force to impose uniform, true religion in England. Presbyterians leaders like Richard Baxter, who himself had been persecuted by Anglicans after the Restoration, took the same position, urging from the 1660s onward that "heretics," meaning the sects, be suppressed. It is difficult to estimate the percentage of the English population that shared these views at the end of the seventeenth century, but the number was not small, as the Sacheverell riots against dissenters in the 1710s demonstrate. Nor was the number small even in revolutionary America, for Jefferson, in his Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom (1777), railed against "legislators and rulers" for interfering in religious affairs and "setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them" on people of other faiths. The potency of these "old-fashioned" views of church and state should not, therefore, be underestimated, as some scholars, beguiled by the growth of latitudinarian views in the late seventeenth century, have done. They

were, at that time, anything but obsolete, although they certainly were not as widespread as they were at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the settlers of Virginia and Massachusetts carried the medieval Hildebrandine convictions about church and state, as glossed by Calvin, to the New World.

The salvation of souls was not the only benefit that, in theory, might result from the application of the coercive power of the state to procure a population's adherence to a single religion. For Queen Elizabeth and many of her successors, a more tangible benefit of the state's ability to compel religious uniformity was the creation and maintenance of social and political stability. Elizabeth's great minister, Lord Burghley, stated a proposition that guided English statesmen for at least a century: There could "be no government where there was a division, and that State co[u]ld never be in Safety, where there was Tolleration of two religions. For there is no Enmytie so greate as that for religion and therefore they that differ in Service of God, can never agree in the Service of theire Contrie." A circular letter from London ministers in 1645 showed how broad the agreement with Elizabethan statesmen was. Anything short of a national uniformity in religion, the ministers claimed, would bring "divers mischiefes upon the Commonwealth. The Kingdome will be wofully weakened by scandalls and Divisions, so that Enemies both domesticall and forraigne will be encouraged to plot and practise against it."

The English Civil War of the 1640s confirmed for Charles II's ministers the truth of Burghley's observation, for they considered the conflict to have been caused by the seditious behavior of recently spawned religious sects. Religious pluralism, they concluded, had plunged the nation into chaos. Consequently, an Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662, reminiscent of Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity

of 1559, whose intent was to prevent the existence of competing religious power centers by confining the public practice of religion to the Church of England. The attempt to impose religious uniformity in this instance was intended to secure and preserve public stability. The conviction that uniformity of religion was essential for political and social stability, carried to America by the first English settlers, persisted in some places until the eve of the American Revolution.

English leaders, lay and clerical, did not depend on the wisdom of the ancients or the teachings of the medieval clerics to justify the state's cooperation with the church. As citizens of a Reformed Protestant nation, they relied on a higher authority, the Bible. Multiple passages in the Old and New Testament were understood to permit – in fact, to require – that the state use all the resources at its command, including force, to assist the church. The Englishmen who first emigrated to America and many who came afterwards in the eighteenth century, especially Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and German Lutherans and Reformed, believed that the Scriptures plainly stated that state–church collaboration was the will of God.

The New Testament passage that was considered to require most authoritatively the state's assistance to the church was Luke 14: 16–23, Jesus' parable about a "certain man," understood to be God, who "made a great supper, and bade many." When the invited guests failed to appear, the lord ordered his servant to "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled." The great church father, St. Augustine, argued that this parable meant that God authorized the state to use force to coerce dissidents to accept the saving mission of the Roman Church. A scholar has written that "Augustine's use of this phrase, compel them to come in, rang down through the centuries, becoming the canonical citation in the history of persecution." In the 1640s Roger

Williams complained that the Augustinian phrase was being used in England to justify state coercion of dissenters. Forty years later it enjoyed a renaissance among High Church Anglicans who urged the suppression of "schismatics" by citing with relish how authorities in Augustine's time had remorselessly compelled Donatists and other dissidents to come into the official church.

Because of its historical association with Catholic persecution, "compel them to come in," was not the weapon of choice in the arsenal of most Protestant Reformers and princes. They preferred instead an arresting passage from the Old Testament, Isaiah 49:23, in which God (as it was believed), speaking through the voice of the prophet, declared to the Church that "kings shall be thy nursing fathers and their queenes thy nursing mothers." Contradicting the traditional Catholic view that a king was a "son" or "disciple" to his priestly "father" or "master," the Isaiah passage had the potential, John Calvin perceived, to appeal to the secular ruler's pride and to arouse him to come to the defense of the young Protestant churches, struggling for existence in a sea of Catholic hostility. Calvin and his followers popularized it so successfully that it became a cliche in seventeenth-century England.

Calvin's interpretation of Isaiah 49:23 first appeared in his *Commentary* on Isaiah, published in 1551 and repeatedly reprinted thereafter. According to Calvin, princes who defended the true, reformed religion obtained "this highest pinnacle of rank, which surpasses dominion and principality of every sort, to be 'nursing-fathers' and guardians of the Church"; to be worthy of this rank princes must be "about removing superstitions and putting an end to all wicked idolatry, about advancing the kingdom of Christ and maintaining purity of doctrine, about purging scandals and cleansing from the filth that corrupts piety and impairs the lustre of Divine majesty."

Confident, apparently, of obtaining an English audience, Calvin dedicated the first edition of his *Commentary* to the young Protestant king, Edward VI, whom the Reformer urged to promote "pure doctrine." "I expressly call upon you," Calvin asserted, "or rather, God himself addresses you by the mouth of his servant Isaiah, charging you to proceed, to the utmost of your ability and power, in carrying forward the restoration of the Church. You daily read and hear that this duty is enjoined on you. More especially Isaiah, as I have said, calls *Kings the nursing fathers of the Church* (Is. xlix. 23) and does not permit them to withhold that assistance which her afflicted condition demands."

The nursing fathers metaphor, as mobilized by Calvin, was an immediate hit among Anglicans in England and Presbyterians in Scotland. James I, successively king of both realms, enthusiastically assumed the role of a nursing father to the church. In his widely read *Declaration against Vorstius* (a Dutch Socinian), James declared "that it is one of the principal parts of that duetie which appertaines unto a Christian King, to protect the trew Church within his owne Dominions, and to extirpate heresies, is a maxime without all controversie." "Those honorouable Titles . . . Nutritius Ecclesiae, Nursing father of the Church," James asserted, "doe rightly belong unto every Emperour, King, and Christian Monarch."

James's son and heir, Charles I, preened himself on being "an indulgent nursing father of the church," thus giving the metaphor the cachet of a second royal patron. In 1652 a critic charged that "it was this very Doctrine that cost the late King Charles his Crown and Life. . . . Who being flattered and bewitched into this dream of a Nursing father, and a judge of wholesome food and poyson for his people; he forced poyson for food on the Scotch Nation," provoking a war which brought him, in due course, to the scaffold.

Charles II and his post-Restoration successors fancied themselves as nursing fathers – William III, for example, was extolled as a "Nursing Father to Zion the Church of God." By the third decade of the eighteenth century, the metaphor was so popular that it was set to music by no less a composer than George Frederick Handel, who used Isaiah 49:23 as the text for one of his coronation odes (1727) for George II. A hundred years later, Anglicans were still saluting their kings, in this case, George IV, as nursing fathers of the church.

Roger Williams and other dissenters were frustrated by the power of the nursing fathers metaphor to obstruct their campaigns for liberty of conscience. "So great a weight of this controversy," he wrote in 1644, "lies upon this precedent of the Old Testament, I shall, with the help of Christ Jesus, the true King of Israel, declare and demonstrate how weak and brittle this supposed pillar of marble is to bear up and sustain such a mighty burden and weight of so many high concernments as are laid upon it." Williams's confidence was misplaced. He broke his own lance against the metaphoric pillar of marble. The metaphor was unshakeably anchored in the consciousness of the three major Protestant groups in seventeenth-century England – Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Independents (Congregationalists), precisely the groups that sent the majority of colonists to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here is the reason that the origin and evolution of the nursing fathers metaphor deserves attention, for these three religious groups carried the metaphor across the Atlantic. At the time of the American Revolution wherever they were in the majority – and they were in the majority in much of the country, Congregationalists in New England and Anglicans south of the Potomac – the concept of the nursing fathers – which transmitted the ancient conviction that God