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John Miller

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

In the reign of Charles II only a small minority of the population of England was Roman Catholic. This minority had owed its survival after the Reformation to the firmness in the faith of the Catholic nobility and gentry, who provided most of the financial support for the priesthood and many of its members. The Catholic community under Charles II was much as it had been at the end of Elizabeth's reign and much as it was to remain until the massive Irish immigrations at the time of the Industrial Revolution. It was primarily aristocratic and rural and it depended on priests trained in seminaries abroad. There were fearsome laws in force against all aspects of Catholic life, but they were enforced comparatively little except in times of crisis. Most Protestant magistrates showed a considerable practical tolerance in their dealings with their Catholic neighbours.

In view of this it may seem surprising that the politics of the period 1660–88 should have been dominated by a violent and often hysterical anti-Catholicism. One must seek the explanation of this apparent anomaly in the religious policies of Charles II and even more in the conversion to Catholicism of James, duke of York, the king's brother and heir-apparent, who eventually succeeded to the throne as James II. In the early part of Charles's reign English anti-Catholicism was latent but far from dead. The attitude to Catholicism of English Protestants had been formed by their interpretation of a century and more of religious conflict since the Reformation. If many Protestants were tolerant of the few Papists among their neighbours, they retained a vigorous fear and hatred of 'Popery', especially of 'Popery' at the royal court or among those in positions of power. Memories of the reign of Queen Mary and the present experience of that of Louis XIV combined to give a frightening picture of the behaviour of Papists in power towards their Protestant subjects. Thus in 1673, when the duke of York's conversion became known, the dreadful prospect of a Catholic king became the central issue of politics. It led directly to the attempts to exclude James from the throne and resulted incidentally in a fierce persecution of Catholics. Tradi-

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tional Protestant images of Catholics and Catholicism also coloured the attitudes of James's subjects when he became king, and strongly influenced their interpretation of his actions and of his intentions. Deep-rooted suspicions of James's motives, which sprang mainly from the fact that he was a Catholic, played a major part in preparing the way for his expulsion.

The first three chapters of this book are concerned with the nature and position of the Catholic community and with the enforcement of the penal laws. The fourth discusses the nature and development of English anti-Catholicism, and the remainder of the book is concerned with the impact of the 'Catholic question' on English politics between 1660 and 1688 and, to a lesser extent, with the impact of political developments on the English Catholics. The last three chapters are concerned with specific aspects of James II's reign: his unhappy relations with Rome, his efforts to turn the rather somnolent Catholic mission into an instrument of evangelism and the type of opposition which his policies aroused. I hope to show that although many of his subjects' assumptions and suspicions were ill-founded, the fact that they were so widely and deeply held meant that James's policies were extremely foolhardy and that they were doomed to eventual failure.

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I

THE CATHOLIC LAITY

THE ELIZABETHAN ORIGINS

The form which English Catholicism was to take in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was largely determined by what happened in Elizabeth's reign. The English church had been ill-prepared, materially and psychologically, to face the challenge of the Reformation. The disposal of many of its richest benefices to clerics employed in the royal and ecclesiastical administrations tended to leave the church weakened and impoverished at the parochial level. Contemporary complaints of the pomp and venality of the higher clergy and the ignorance and incompetence of their inferiors had a firm basis in fact, but were both exaggerated and to some extent misdirected. However scandalous it might seem to humanist or Protestant intellectuals that many parish priests knew hardly a word of Latin, it mattered less to their illiterate parishioners who knew none at all. The old church may have been concerned mainly with outward observances, it may have taken over and endorsed pre-Christian practices and superstitions and it may have instilled no deep spiritual understanding into the people at large. It did however provide a series of 'ingrained observances which defined and gave meaning to the cycle of the week and the seasons of the year, to birth, marriage and death'. It also provided and enforced a rudimentary moral code.¹

The old church maintained a vigorous if crude spiritual life, but it was one whose beliefs, at a popular level, could not be described as informed or clearly articulated. The old ways had seldom been openly challenged and the church was unused to defending itself; neither clergy nor laity had ever known anything different. Then, suddenly, the habits of centuries were disrupted

¹ J. Bossy, 'The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism', in T. Aston (ed.) *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660* (London, 1965), p. 223; H. Aveling, *Northern Catholics: The Catholic Recusants of the North Riding of Yorkshire 1558-1790* (London, 1966), p. 49.

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by the break with Rome, the swing to Protestantism under Edward VI, the reversion to Catholicism under Mary and the re-establishment of Protestantism, finally as it turned out, under Elizabeth. The average parishioner was faced with a bewildering series of changes, back and forth: services in English, the removal of images and crucifixes, the suppression of monasteries, the prohibition of pilgrimages and many traditional processions. A minority reacted violently: the Lincolnshire rebels of 1536 feared, among other things, that their church plate would be taken away; the Cornish rebels of 1549 complained that they could not understand the new English service (at which Cranmer snidely asked if they had understood the old Latin one).² Most conformed outwardly as they had always done, with a bewilderment tinged with resentment at the disruption of age-old routines. Some pre-Reformation practices, like beating the bounds at Rogation Tide, were taken over by the Church of England. The traditional Corpus Christi plays were performed at York until the later 1570s.³ Those Catholic practices which the Church of England refused to adopt were gradually stamped out. For some time, however, it was far from obvious that the 1559 settlement was to be permanent; Elizabeth nearly died in 1562 and there were many prophecies that the old religion would be restored. Catholic vestments were stored away in the 1560s in the belief that they would soon be needed again.⁴ There were as yet few people who could be described definitely as either Catholic or Protestant. The bulk of the population was bewildered and uncertain. Most of the old parish clergy conformed to the new order; they were not pressed to conform in every detail at first, as there were too few Protestant ministers to take their places. Some of these 'conservative conformists' among the clergy were later squeezed out as the authorities came to demand a greater measure of con-

² M. E. James, 'Obedience and Dissent in Henrician England: The Lincolnshire Rebellion, 1536', *P & P*, 48 (1970) 15–16; A. Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions* (London, 1968), pp. 58–9.

³ Aveling, *Catholic Recusancy in the City of York 1558–1791* (CRS monograph no. 2, 1970), pp. 31–4, 54.

⁴ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, pp. 20–3, 75, 79; Aveling, *The Catholic Recusants of the West Riding of Yorkshire 1558–1790* (Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, vol. x, 1963), p. 205; K. V. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), pp. 405–8.

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formity; many more died and were replaced.⁵ The universities began to produce enthusiastic Protestant ministers, whose mission was to convert England to Protestantism. The process of evangelisation had proceeded some way in the South and East even before Elizabeth's accession but in the North and West, not to mention Wales, it had hardly started. It was to be a long process, never more than partially successful.

In the 1560s religion in England was in a state of flux. The old church, its rituals and its sacraments had been taken away but the new church had not yet developed a character of its own. Both Catholics and Protestants had to try to learn 'to do what the past had not prepared them for – to maintain a faith as the result of an individual choice, very largely unsustainable by institutions and a solid framework of social habits'.⁶ The 1559 Act of Uniformity required everyone to attend his parish church. Deprived of direction, most conservatives did so,⁷ but many refused the sacrament and paid little attention to the service, and so were called 'mislikers' of the new religion. There were as yet few conscious Catholics who clearly recognised the difference between the new form of worship and the old; indeed, however Protestant its doctrine might be, the form of worship imposed by the Church of England was not so unlike the traditional form as to make it intolerable to the vast mass of theologically unsophisticated conservatives of all classes.⁸ Elizabeth's government was content to imprison and silence the leading conscious Catholics, notably Mary's bishops, in the hope that the rest would eventually conform if deprived of leadership. This did not happen, thanks largely to the efforts of small groups of Catholic intellectuals, many from the universities, who fled to the continent early in the reign and settled first at Louvain. Outstanding among them were William Allen, who eventually became a cardinal, and Robert Parsons, the Jesuit. The exiles' writings, which included a Catholic English Bible, clarified a Catholic position in danger of

⁵ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, pp. 25–33; Aveling, *West Riding*, pp. 196–200; K. R. Wark, *Elizabethan Recusancy in Cheshire* (Chetham Soc., 1971), p. 2; most of the old priests in the West Riding were dead by 1577: Aveling, *West Riding*, p. 203.

⁶ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, p. 49.

⁷ Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, p. 35; Bossy, p. 226.

⁸ This point was made by J. Berington, *Memoirs of Gregorio Panzani* (Birmingham, 1793), p. 17.

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being lost through lack of definition and direction. Equally important, the exiles founded a series of schools, starting with the English college at Douai in 1568. These performed a double function: they provided, for the sons of English Catholics, the Catholic education which they were increasingly denied at home, and they trained the new generation of 'seminary priests' who were sent on missions to arrest and reverse the decay of Catholicism in England.⁹

The coming of the 'seminary priests' finally ensured the survival of English Catholicism. But even before they arrived, in the later 1570s and early 1580s, there were signs that in some cases undifferentiated conservatism and 'misliking' were hardening into a more conscious Catholicism. More Catholics became 'recusants' – they stayed away from the Protestant services in their parish churches. There were several reasons for this hardening. The minority of Marian priests who had refused to conform were partly responsible.¹⁰ Works written by the exiles were imported in large numbers and must have made an impression on literate Catholic laymen.¹¹ There were also little cells of Catholic teaching. At first Catholics were not forbidden to attend the universities. At Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, John Caius and his successor Dr Legge were accused by the fellows of being 'fosterers of Papists by drawing them into fellowships, encouraging others with maintenance, countenance and example . . . which for many years have made the college as a seminary to poison the commonwealth with corrupted gentlemen'. However, by the end of the 1580s the college had lost its Catholic associations as most others had done some time before.¹² Prisons were rather surprisingly another source of Catholic teaching.

⁹ P. Guilday, *The English Catholic Refugees on the Continent 1558-1795* (London, 1914); A. C. F. Beales, *Education under Penalty* (London, 1963), chaps. 3-4.

¹⁰ Some Marian priests had got faculties abroad to reconcile to the church those who had attended Protestant services: Aveling, *West Riding*, p. 208; Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, p. 87.

¹¹ Aveling, *City of York*, pp. 41-2, 45-6; Aveling, *Northern Catholics*, p. 106; L. Rostenberg, *The Minority Press and the English Crown 1558-1625* (Nieuwkoop, 1971), chaps. 2-3.

¹² J. Venn, *Caius College* (Cambridge, 1901), pp. 55-8, 65-6, 77-80, 85; M. H. Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition 1558-1642* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 168-9.

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Catholic priests and laymen were imprisoned for varying periods and carried on a mission there. The prisons, though noisome, were run for profit by private individuals and a wealthy prisoner could enjoy a substantial amount of freedom. Mass was often said in gaols and people went from outside to hear it. In 1582 four priests climbed into York castle prison to say Mass, one being captured on the way out. In 1611 it was found that some prisoners were running a dame school for Catholic girls in another of the York prisons. In 1612 the keeper of Newgate was said to have made it 'rather a chapel for superstitious service than a prison or gaol for strait keeping'.¹³

Another reason why conservatism developed into recusancy was because the government's attitude hardened after the rebellion of the Northern earls in 1569 and the pope's excommunication of the queen in 1570. Catholics now seemed a potential fifth column, ready to rise against the queen on behalf of a Catholic invader. The Privy Council spent much time and energy on the surveillance and harassment of leading Catholics. This drove some into temporary or permanent conformity with the established church, but it also forced others to think more clearly about their religious position. The turning point of the reign came in 1578–82. Until then the government had tried to pick off and silence the natural leaders of English Catholicism, hoping that without leadership their following would gradually be eroded. But the increasing self-consciousness of the surviving Catholic minority was now being strengthened by the mission of the seminary priests, who helped to give backbone to the love of traditional observances by inculcating a sense of identity based on membership of the one true church. The government came to realise that the old religion was not going to wither away just as the danger to the Protestant state from Catholicism was reaching its height. The claims to the throne, first of Mary Queen of Scots and then of Philip of Spain, were eagerly supported by a number of the exiles, including Allen and Parsons. Faced with this danger, the government cracked down hard on the English Catholics. The penalty for absence from church was raised from one shilling a week to £20 a month. It was made a capital crime for a priest to come into England, or for him to convert anyone,

¹³ Aveling, *City of York*, pp. 59–65, 82; P. Caraman, *The Years of Siege: Catholic Life from James I to Cromwell* (London, 1966), pp. 66–7.

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or for anybody to harbour him. The martyrdoms which followed this new legislation strengthened the Catholics' steadfastness and sense of identity.

The energy and determination of the first generation of Elizabethan Catholics ensured the survival of the faith in England. It could never again be the religion of the majority, after the twenty years of uncertainty and erosion at the start of the reign. The efforts of the government and of the Protestant clergy ensured that Catholic numbers did not increase, and probably fell, in the seventeenth century. But Catholicism had sufficient strength among the nobility and gentry to be proof against sporadic attempts to exterminate it. The Catholics soon realised that they were doomed to remain a minority in a Protestant nation: 'The state seems now to be settled against the religion of our forefathers and not unlike so to continue,' wrote a priest in 1608.¹⁴ Most therefore relapsed into passivity, resigned to exclusion from public life, asking only to be left alone. The political activism of a minority of the exiles against the Protestant state had never found much of an echo among the Catholic squirearchy and now virtually disappeared.¹⁵ The Gunpowder Plotters were an atypical minority. After a period of severe persecution after the Gunpowder Plot, the government's attitude relaxed. Charles I was more concerned to raise money from the Catholics than to crush Catholicism. Only two priests were executed between 1625 and 1640.

The Parliamentarians' fierce hatred of Papists and the king's identification with them ensured that many Catholics fought for the king in the Civil Wars, although the majority remained neutral.¹⁶ Catholics suffered more severely than other Royalists from mob violence on the eve of the war and from the depredations of the Parliamentary forces; the butchering of the predominantly Catholic garrison of Basing House in 1645 was one of the few real atrocities of the Civil War.¹⁷ After the war,

¹⁴ Caraman, p. 21.

¹⁵ Guilday, p. xviii; Bossy, pp. 243–6.

¹⁶ K. J. Lindley, 'The Part Played by Catholics in the English Civil War' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, Manchester, 1968), *passim*.

¹⁷ R. Clifton, 'The Popular Fear of Catholics during the English Revolution', *P & P*, 52 (1971), 31–2; S. R. Gardiner, *History of the Great Civil War* (4 vols., London, 1893), ii, 363–4.

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Catholic 'delinquents' (those who had fought for the king) were supposed to lose four-fifths of their lands and mere Papists two-thirds. But by compounding or fictitious sales many avoided having their lands confiscated or quickly recovered them; most emerged at the Restoration with a heavy load of debt but with most of their lands intact. Apart from the confiscations, Catholics were not vigorously persecuted under the Protectorate, although a greater measure of repression was envisaged through the new penal legislation of 1657.¹⁸ With the Restoration, the English Catholics recovered most of their lands and hoped for some relaxation of the penal laws as a tangible recognition of their loyalty to Charles I.

THE NUMBER OF CATHOLICS

Any estimate of the number of Catholics in England under Charles II must be largely conjectural. Petitions for a bishop in 1660 and 1664 gave figures of 100,000 and 200,000 respectively, but in 1679 the earl of Castlemaine put the figure as low as 50,000.¹⁹ According to the census taken in 1676 on the orders of Henry Compton, bishop of London, there were 11,867 Catholics over the age of sixteen in the province of Canterbury.²⁰ Opinions vary on the accuracy of this census; its purpose was to show how few non-Anglicans there were and it included only those Catholics and Protestant Dissenters who stayed away from church – not 'church-papists' or occasional conformists. Within those limitations, the figures it gave were probably not a great underestimate.²¹ The census did not include figures for the province of

¹⁸ M. Greenslade, *A List of Staffordshire Recusants, 1657* (Staffs. Record Soc., 1958), pp. 72–4.

¹⁹ AAW A32, pp. 187, 469; R. Palmer, earl of Castlemaine, *The Compendium* (1679), p. 85. (Castlemaine was, of course, trying to minimise the threat from Catholics to the Protestant nation.) At least one non-Catholic, Sir Peter Pett, accepted Castlemaine's figure: *The Happy Future State of England* (1688), p. 149. In 1637 the papal agent Panzani had estimated the English Catholic population as being 150,000: B. Magee, *The English Recusants* (London, 1938), p. 104.

²⁰ A. Browning (ed.), *English Historical Documents 1660–1714* (London, 1953), pp. 413–14.

²¹ J. A. Williams, *Catholic Recusancy in Wiltshire, 1660–1791* (CRS monograph no. 1, 1968), pp. 253–7; S. A. Peyton, 'The Religious

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York and its compilers very rashly assumed that, as its population was one-sixth that of the province of Canterbury, it would include one-sixth the number of Papists (1978). This was clearly nonsense. In 1687 the Catholic bishop John Leyburn toured the North and Midlands and confirmed nearly 20,000 people, including 17,290 in the province of York.²² It is difficult to guess what relation this figure might bear to the Catholic population of the North. Leyburn was the first Catholic bishop to visit the area for well over fifty years, so the great majority of the Catholic population could not have received the sacrament of confirmation before and would probably have taken the opportunity to do so. But it is possible that the surviving lists are incomplete (there are none for Cheshire, for instance) and that not all Catholics were able to meet Leyburn, especially those living in remote areas. Nevertheless I think it is not unreasonable to see the number of those confirmed as only a modest under-estimate of those over the age of seven in the North. The number of confirmations in Yorkshire (3369) squares quite well with the rev. Aveling's estimate of 4170 Catholics, adults and children, in the county in the 1680s.²³

Census of 1676', *EHR*, xlvi (1933), 100-1; S. C. Ratcliff and H. C. Johnson (eds.), *Warwick County Records*, vii (Warwick, 1946), pp. lxxviii-c: the census showed 675 Papists in Warwickshire over the age of sixteen, and 509 Popish recusants were presented at quarter sessions; in 1687 bishop Leyburn confirmed 1024 Catholics over the age of about seven in the county: T. B. Trappes-Lomax, 'Bishop Leyburn's Visitation in 1687', *Newsletter for Students of Recusant History*, iv (1962), 20. The detailed census returns that are in Lambeth Palace Library (MS 639, fols. 163-9, 252-9) do not fill one with confidence about the precise accuracy of the figures.

²² Trappes-Lomax, pp. 16-21; I have deducted the figures for those confirmed in Northants., Lincs., Staffs. and Warwicks., which counties are in the Province of Canterbury, and I have added the 529 for Garswood, Lancs., to which Trappes-Lomax refers. Even if other lists have been lost which would push the total up to the 20,859 given in the original, the total for the Northern province could not exceed 18,665. The arithmetic of the original lists (AAW A35, pp. 13-400) is erratic, that of Brig. Trappes-Lomax contains only a few minor errors.

²³ Seven was the minimum age which the church recommended, although a few of those confirmed may have been younger: *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1908), iv, 216; Trappes-Lomax, p. 21. For Aveling's figures, see his essay 'Some Aspects of Yorkshire Catholic Recusant History', in G. J. Cuming (ed.), *Studies in Church History*, iv (Leiden,