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978-0-521-10953-6 - Resistance and Compromise: The Political Thought of the Elizabethan Catholics

Peter Holmes

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Catholics of Elizabethan England faced problems similar to those which confronted men in various other parts of Europe at the time: these problems stemmed from the fact that they differed from their sovereign in religion. By the second half of the century the Holy Roman Emperor ruled over a large number of Lutherans; in France the Huguenots formed a sizable minority under the Most Christian King; in the Netherlands a Catholic king faced a growing body of Calvinists. To a greater or lesser extent this pattern was repeated all over Western Christendom. Thus the Elizabethan Catholics were not unique; indeed, their difficulties and the answers they found to them are in some ways typical of European history in the era of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. In one important respect they were unusual, however: the experience of being in a minority as a religious group was generally that of Protestants. The only other Catholic minorities which spring easily to mind are the Scots, who were naturally rather closely associated with the English in any case; and rather later the Dutch Papists in the United Provinces. This made it more difficult for Catholics in England – lacking the support and example of men of the same church in the same position – to adapt to their position under Elizabeth. Differing from their prince in religion brought for English Catholics, as it did for other minority groups at the time, many difficulties. These were partly of their own making, resulting from their desire to pursue their religious observances and to separate themselves from those of the Church of England. The response of the Queen's government to this non-conformity then itself created further problems, as gradually during the course of the reign Catholics faced persecution, which, while it did not match the cruelty of

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that suffered by the Marian Protestants, was nevertheless real enough. The purpose of this book is to analyse the difficulties of the Elizabethan Catholics and the solutions they found to them.

The field of options open to a persecuted religious minority in sixteenth-century Europe may be narrowed to two fundamental issues. First, what forms of religious observance could be maintained under persecution and how far could the dissenter go in accommodating himself to the ecclesiastical and doctrinal order established by his ruler? In short, what form should his religious opposition or resistance take to a church which he considered heretical or idolatrous? The second problem was more obviously political: was the political regime of the sovereign to be recognised and were his commands to be obeyed; or might disobedience, even rebellion, be lawful? It is in terms of these two central themes that I have described the opinions and ideas of the Elizabethan Catholics.

The first of these problems – the question of religious resistance – is clearly central to an understanding of the sixteenth-century minority groups, although it has not received the attention from historians which it deserves. *Prima facie*, there seems to be little difficulty: the very definition of a group with a separate religious identity depends upon a degree of religious resistance to the established church. Indeed, the great text of the period was Acts 5. 29: ‘We ought to obey God rather than men.’ If the prince commanded a man to disobey the divine law, his commands were not to be obeyed. On this basis, a separation of Huguenots from Catholic France and of Catholics from Anglican England was established. But much practical complexity underlies this seeming theoretical simplicity. Under persecution, what forms of obedience to God were absolutely necessary and which might be set aside in order to avoid punishment? How could the ecclesiastical ideals of a religion practised under royal approval be achieved by a scattered community subject to the pressures of a hostile society? Which was preferable: exile or martyrdom; stealth or discovery; a measured degree of conformity or extirpation? Martin Luther counselled his followers to obey their rulers without rebellion in all things except those which affected their religious observances. But the reaction of another reformer was markedly different. Otto Brunfels enunciated the doctrine first in 1527, in response to

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the Peasants' War (which itself helped Luther to develop his own political ideas) that to avoid persecution even obedience to the religious commands of an idolatrous prince might be lawful. If rebellion was not licit, only death at the hands of a Papist ruler faced a believer who practised his religion openly. The vehemence with which the leading reformers, notably John Calvin, denounced this doctrine suggests that it was widely held and practised in various parts of Europe in the sixteenth century by those who faced Catholic persecution. Especially in places like Italy and pre-Huguenot France, where heresy was thinly spread and subject to severe penalties, the practice of 'Nicodemism', or secret adherence internally to reformed doctrine, while openly following Catholicism, was perhaps almost the norm.¹ As will be seen in the course of this present study, the Catholics of Elizabethan England faced a similar dilemma.

More attention has been given by the historians of political opinions to the second of our major themes: the question of political obedience. To simplify, the Catholics of Elizabethan England, like the other religious minorities, could choose between two ideologies. On the one hand, the most popular doctrine of the period taught that the political (or non-religious) commands of a king should be obeyed whatever his theological views or however harsh his government. Such a ruler was not, of course, praised – indeed, he might, by Luther for example, be severely rebuked – but his punishment should be left to God, and his subjects could comfort themselves with the knowledge that their suffering would be rewarded by the same agency. The alternative ideology rejected this long-suffering quietism, and held that there might be lawful resistance to a ruler who persecuted the true religion or who misused his power. There was, of course, a middle ground between these starkly opposed political theories, although it is not to be found expressed with great enthusiasm by members of religious minority groups. These competing ideologies developed and hardened, partly as a result of the tensions created by the religious strife of the period, emerging into the seventeenth century as full-blown theories of divine-right absolute kingship or of popular sovereignty and the right of resistance.

What is remarkable is the ease with which religious leaders transferred from one of these political theories to another. In

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1547, for example, the Edwardian *Book of homilies* was published, containing a brief essay in non-resistance in the form of 'An exhortation concerning good order, and obedience to rulers and magistrates'. This work expressed the orthodox view (at the time) of the Church of England, that rebellion and disobedience to royal authority were sinful:

it is an intolerable ignorance, madness and wickedness, for subjects to make any murmuring, rebellion, or resistance, or withstanding, commotion, or insurrection, against their most dear and most dread sovereign lord and king, ordained and appointed of God's goodness for their commodity, peace and quietness.²

But within a decade the Bishop of Winchester (among other divines) had completely abandoned this view of politics. In his *Short treatise of politic power* (1556), Bishop Ponet maintained that royal authority was derived from the people, who were able to choose their government and to change it if necessary. The power of a king was limited: he was bound both by the laws of God and by the positive laws of the commonwealth. Obedience was a virtue only in moderation, Ponet maintained, 'for too much maketh the governors to forget their vocation and to usurp upon their subjects'. If a king ruled badly, he became a tyrant and could legitimately be killed by his subjects.³ Clearly this rapid conversion from non-resistance to a defence of tyrannicide owed everything to political circumstances, the change from Edward VI to Mary Tudor. The same ideological agility is to be found in the history of German Lutheranism, of both Huguenotism and Catholicism in France, and of Catholicism in Elizabethan England itself.

The political and religious debates of the Reformation era were encouraged by the growth of printing in Europe, and the consequent and attendant developments of both lay and (sometimes overlooked) clerical education in the period. The Elizabethan Catholics excelled in both fields. Led by William Allen and Robert Persons, the Papists in exile founded colleges, largely to train priests, in the Low Countries, France, Spain and at Rome. Some attempt has been made in the following pages to establish what the seminarists were taught in these establishments. But the main source for a study of the political opinions of the Catholics of Elizabethan England is in their printed works, although manu-

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script books still circulated as a relic of more primitive and, under persecution, perhaps safer forms of communication. The standard catalogue of post-Reformation Catholic printed books (the invaluable guide of Messrs Allison and Rogers) lists over 260 English books published in the reign of Elizabeth, and very many of these can be made to yield evidence of political attitudes.⁴ In addition, a number of English Catholic authors continued to develop their ideas in Latin and in other languages. Several of these books are well-studied and available in modern editions, although others were rare when they were first published and now survive in only one or two copies, while their authorship and the circumstances of their composition remain obscure and doubtful.⁵ Reading these pamphlets is often, to twentieth-century taste, tedious work, but several show considerable stylistic ability, powers of scholarship and strength of argument. Catholicism represented a threat to Elizabeth greater than the figures in the Recusant Rolls suggest it should, partly because it had at its disposal the intellectual dynamism of the Counter-Reformation which attracted and stimulated the minds of men like Robert Persons, William Allen, Robert Southwell and Thomas Stapleton, whose talents shine bright even in the Elizabethan age.

The broad range of political ideas expressed by the Elizabethan Catholics and the other religious minorities of the period has been dealt with in several general surveys of sixteenth-century political thought. The works of J. N. Figgis and C. H. McIlwain will continue to be read, both for their scholarship and their stylistic vitality. The studies of Christopher Morris and J. W. Allen provide a stable, workmanlike foundation of knowledge for all students to build on, and more recently Professor Skinner's study of *The foundations of modern political thought* (while it does not directly deal with the writings of the Catholics under Elizabeth) has added considerably to our understanding of the complexity of the Protestant response to the political problems of the day.⁶ In my own field there have been two detailed studies, by Fr Clancy and Dr Pritchard, of the political ideas of the 'Allen–Persons party' and of the Catholic loyalists under Elizabeth.⁷ In treating the reign as a whole and presenting my analysis largely in chronological form I hope to have added somewhat to their findings. The evidence of the printed books and the opinions they express

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leads me to believe that there were no distinct parties or groups among the Elizabethan Catholics, with their own separate responses to the political problems of the day. It is undeniable that, at the end of the reign, two groups – the Appellants and the supporters of the Archpriest – developed, but, as I will argue, I cannot accept that there were profound ideological differences between these groups. Nor does the evidence of the printed books – on which a historian of political opinions in the sixteenth century of necessity must rely in large part – support the view that there was ever in the reign of Elizabeth a ‘loyalist’ group who presented a sustained critique of the ideas of a party led by Allen and Persons. What emerged rather surprisingly from my research was a clearly defined chronological rhythm to the development of the political ideas of the Elizabethan Catholics, taken as a whole and not divided into groups or parties.

The political, social and religious history of Catholics in Elizabethan England has been the subject of a number of excellent studies. Most attention has been focused on government policy towards Catholics, on the international and diplomatic ramifications of Catholic resistance to Elizabeth, and on the hagiography of the mission itself. The work of J. H. Pollen, A. O. Meyer, and more recently of Fr Loomie and Professor Bossy has added considerably both to our knowledge of the Catholics themselves and by extension of the Elizabethan period as a whole.⁸ The internal history of Elizabethan Catholicism itself, especially at home in England and especially with reference to the laity, has been rather neglected. Professor Trimble’s study of the ‘Catholic laity’ under Elizabeth was largely a discussion (and a very good one) of government policy. Recent local studies and the work on a broader time scale of Professor Bossy and J. C. H. Aveling point the way for further research.⁹ At various points in this book I have attempted to show how my own studies seem to conflict with the established view of Elizabethan Catholicism, especially that contained in Bossy’s seminal essay on the ‘Character of Elizabethan Catholicism’. To summarise briefly here, I consider that there is considerably more continuity between the early years of Elizabeth’s reign and the more heroic days of the seminarists than Bossy allows. Secondly, I disagree with the view that Elizabethan Catholicism is best understood in terms of division, especially

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division between laity and clergy. There is little evidence in the printed books of the period for any disagreement between priests and laymen over political ideas.

What is not in doubt, however, as a result of the work of Professor Bossy and other scholars in this field, is the importance of a study of the Catholic minority to our understanding of the Tudor period. To adapt a phrase of Professor Elton there was no 'high road' to Catholic extinction, and the Elizabethans regarded Popery as immeasurably more dangerous than Puritanism. Indeed, the threat of Catholicism, with its international ramifications, its connection with the question of the succession, and its insidious danger to internal security, may be seen as the central and most important theme in the history of Elizabeth's reign. In the following pages, I hope to cast some light on one aspect of this theme and hence on our understanding of the period as a whole.

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Part One

POLITICAL NON-RESISTANCE

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I

*Half-hearted non-resistance:
the Louvainists 1558–68*

THE FIRST YEARS OF THE REIGN

Evidence of Catholic activity and for Catholic opinions in the early years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth is rather scarce. By comparison, the sources for a study of Catholicism later in the century are ample both on the government side and in the papers of Catholics themselves. This shortage of documentary material has, understandably, left the first decade of the reign suffering from historiographical neglect, and this neglect has tended to breed contempt. Recent studies of Elizabethan Catholicism have seen these as years of ‘drift’ and ‘decline’, which witnessed the death of the old Church. It was not until the 1570s, according to this view, that an English Catholic resistance to the Elizabethan settlement developed, and it was a rebirth not a revival.¹ The scarcity of political writings in the period might be held to confirm this view. Evidence for the political ideas of the Elizabethan Catholics in this first decade is scattered and contradictory in what it reveals. On the whole, however, I feel that it is best to see the period in a more sympathetic light. Two substantial achievements of Catholics in the face of Elizabeth’s accession and the consolidation of her regime cannot be ignored. First, the Catholic hierarchy and a proportion of the clergy refused to conform to the new settlement of 1559; and second, a number of these non-conformists organised themselves in the Netherlands and began to publish a large number of works of religious controversy. From this community of exiles there emerged gradually the features which best characterise the Catholic resistance to Elizabeth: plots to dethrone the Queen and seminaries to train priests who would attend to the religious needs of the laity at home. Similarly, though scattered and brief, the published political statements of the earliest

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Elizabethan Catholics give a foretaste of the principal themes which were to dominate the political literature of the whole reign. If the Louvainists failed to resolve adequately the ideological dilemma facing them, their more illustrious descendants had, taken altogether, hardly more success, though their writings were more voluminous and systematic.

Through the confusion and the paucity of sources a pattern emerges. The dominant theme in the political statements of the early Catholics is that of political non-resistance. They expressed, on the whole, their loyalty to the Queen, despite their religious opposition to her, and refused to countenance opposition to her political regime. In this the Louvainists foreshadowed again the history of Catholicism in the whole of Elizabeth's reign, since this was also the most popular ideological stance taken by Catholic writers throughout the period.

If the first decade of the reign is lacking in evidence of the political opinions of Catholics, this is doubly true of the first few years, before the Louvainists began to publish their religious polemics. This very interesting period, when the bishops were deciding to resign and to oppose the religious settlement in parliament, and as the first Catholics moved abroad to the Low Countries, is particularly badly documented. The record of a few speeches made mainly in parliament by Catholic prelates has, however, survived, and in these we read a few fairly conventional protestations of loyalty to the Queen, and expressions of a belief in the illegality of revolt and of political opposition to her.

The senior surviving representative of the Catholic hierarchy, Archbishop Heath of York, delivered a speech in the Lords against the Supremacy Bill in which he declared his complete willingness to acknowledge the Queen's temporal supremacy. She was 'our sovereign lord and lady, our king and queen, our emperor and empress', he said, 'by right and inheritance' and 'by the appointment of God'. Elizabeth owed no foreign prince tribute, and she was as humble, virtuous and godly as any ruler of England ever had been. The reigning Pope, on the other hand, Heath maintained, had been 'a very austere, stern father unto us, ever since his first entrance into Peter's chair'.² The Bishop of Chester, speaking on the same occasion, also affirmed his loyalty to the Queen 'not only for wrath and displeasure's sake, but for con-