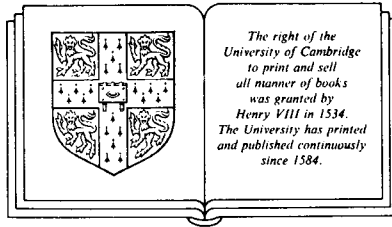


# The English Sabbath

*A study of doctrine and discipline from  
the Reformation to the Civil War*

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xii
1 The case for a reappraisal	1
2 Medieval sabbatarianism and Reformation reaction	8
3 Early Elizabethan sabbatarianism: 1558–82	41
4 Late Elizabethan and Jacobean sabbatarianism: 1583–1617	92
5 The Book of Sports controversy: 1617–18	139
6 The 1620s: continued consensus	161
7 The sabbatarian controversy	178
Epilogue	217
<i>Appendix</i>	220
<i>Bibliography</i>	222
<i>Index</i>	242

## The case for a reappraisal

Sometimes it would seem that we regard Protestantism as a Thing, a fixed and definite object that came into existence in 1517... as though Protestantism itself had no antecedents, as though it were a fallacy to go behind the great water-shed, as though indeed it would blunt the edge of our story to admit the working of a process instead of assuming the interposition of some direct agency.

*The Whig Interpretation of History*, Herbert Butterfield

From the publication of Thomas Fuller's *Church History of Britain* in 1655 to the present, studies of sabbatarianism have treated this doctrine as an important and controversial issue in the post-Reformation period. These studies portray sabbatarianism as a puritan innovation, which that party introduced in an effort to reform the Church from below, having failed to convert the English Church to presbyterianism. This doctrinal 'novelty' is thought to have created a division between Church authorities and puritans by the end of Elizabeth's reign. By denying the importance of ancient or medieval precedents for 'puritan' sabbatarianism and highlighting selected events in the Elizabethan and early Stuart period, these studies have provided a convincing account of 'puritan' doctrinal innovation and agitation for sabbatarian reforms.

When the outlines of these studies are compared, one cannot help noting that they draw their points of reference from the Laudian partisan, Peter Heylyn, in his *History of the Sabbath*, published in 1636. However, this Laudian summary of sabbatarian developments in Elizabethan and Stuart England does not take into account much evidence that suggests a very different story. Heylyn claimed that the notion of a morally binding Sabbath was a puritan invention; yet this doctrine was firmly rooted in the Middle Ages. Heylyn charged puritans with attempting to subvert the established religion with their sabbatarian doctrine; however, there is much evidence which suggests consensus rather than conflict. A reappraisal of these issues may suggest the need to revise our understanding of English sabbatarianism.

While there are many shades of sabbatarian opinion which could be examined, there are two points of view that are relevant for this study. The first is the position which Peter Heylyn treated as the definitive teaching of the Church, ancient and modern. This position treated the fourth commandment as a ceremonial law, abrogated by Christ along with other laws of the Old Testament. The commandment was allegorized and treated as an injunction to rest from sin all our days. Heylyn explained that Sunday was first used in apostolic times and established by Constantine in 321 as the Christian day of worship and rest. This observance was authorized by the Church and regulated by canon law, and was not a divine institution or grounded in scripture.

In contrast, the sabbatarian doctrine Heylyn attributed to Elizabethan puritans, treated the sabbath commandment as a perpetual and moral law, as binding on Christians as the rest of the decalogue. The shift of the day from Saturday to Sunday did not diminish this obligation, for it was divinely instituted to commemorate Christ's resurrection and was not a mere ecclesiastical convention. The whole day was to be kept holy, with public and private exercises of religion and rest from all worldly labours and recreations; for these would distract, and rob God of the time set aside for spiritual works.

Ecclesiastical historians, in attempting to make sense of religious attitudes in the post-Reformation period, have used sabbatarianism as a litmus test of 'puritan' and 'Anglican' leanings. Thomas Fuller explained that, 'all strange and unknown writers, without further examination, passed for friends and favourites of the presbyterian party, who could give the word, and had anything in their treatise tending to the strict observation of the Lord's day'.<sup>1</sup> The eighteenth-century historian, Jeremy Collier, wrote in his *Ecclesiastical History of Great Britain* that, 'the Puritans having miscarried in their open attacks upon the Church, endeavoured to carry on their designs more under covert. Their magnifying the Sabbath-day, as they call Sunday, was a serviceable expedient for this purpose. Preaching the strict observance of this festival had a strong colour of zeal, and gained them the character of persons particularly concerned for the honour of God Almighty'.<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century Robert Cox continued this

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Fuller, *The Church History of Britain*, 3 vols. (London, 1868), III, 162.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Collier, *An Ecclesiastical History of Great Britain*, 9 vols. (London, 1852), VII, 190.

historiographical tradition.<sup>3</sup> Cox's works, and similar studies by W. B. Trevelyan and W. B. Whitaker, were primarily polemical in nature and were produced to defend the strict sabbatarian concerns prevalent in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain.<sup>4</sup> In the last fifty years there has been a tempering of this rigid distinction, but the underlying assumption that sabbatarianism was a puritan innovation and characteristic remains. M. M. Knappen in his short study of the 'Puritan doctrine of Sunday' described it as, 'a bit of English originality and is the first and perhaps the only important English contribution to the development of Reformed theology in the first century of its history'.<sup>5</sup> Winton Solberg concluded in his study of the English Sabbath that 'Sabbatarianism became a distinguishing characteristic of Puritanism as early as the 1590s'.<sup>6</sup> While acknowledging that sabbatarian concerns were shared by 'Anglicans' and 'puritans' in the first fifteen years of Elizabeth's reign, Richard Greaves nevertheless concluded that this matter, 'came to be one of the most hotly disputed spheres of contention by 1603'.<sup>7</sup>

Two conclusions seem to be common to studies of sabbatarianism written by religious historians. The first is that sabbatarianism was a puritan innovation which began to surface in the 1570s and 1580s and was crystallized into a formal doctrine by the 1590s. The second conclusion is that this doctrine was a source of conflict between Church authorities and puritans that led to an open division by 1603.

Political historians in search of the origins of the Civil War have associated the sabbatarian polemics of the 1640s with the tension religious historians have highlighted in the Elizabethan and early Stuart period. Samuel Gardiner noted that this 'puritan inno-

<sup>3</sup> Robert Cox, *The Literature of the Sabbath Question*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1865); *Sabbath Laws and Sabbath Duties* (Edinburgh, 1853); *The Whole Doctrine of Calvin about the Sabbath and the Lords Day* (Edinburgh, 1860).

<sup>4</sup> W. B. Trevelyan, *Sunday* (London, 1903); W. B. Whitaker, *Sunday in Tudor and Stuart Times* (London, 1933).

<sup>5</sup> M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism* (Chicago, 1970, first ed. 1938), p.442. See also: Max Levy, *Der Sabbath in England* (Leipzig, 1933).

<sup>6</sup> Winton Solberg, *Redeem the Time* (London, 1977), pp.59-60.

<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Greaves, 'The Origins of English Sabbatarian Thought', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 12 (1981), 19-34 (p.33). Also see John Primus, 'Calvin and the Puritan Sabbath: A Comparative Study', in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, edited by David E. Holwerda (Grand Rapids, 1976); articles by Richard J. Baukham in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, edited by Donald Carson (Grand Rapids, 1982); James T. Dennison, Jr, *The Market Day of the Soul* (Lanham, Maryland, 1983).

vation' was resisted because 'all England had been accustomed from time immemorial to consider that at the close of the service the religious duties of the day were at an end'.<sup>8</sup> He was certain of episcopal opposition to sabbatarianism and cited the Lancashire Book of Sports controversy as an example of the conflicts between the authorities and puritans over this issue. J. R. Tanner draws a similar conclusion in his studies of the period.<sup>9</sup> More recently, G. H. Tupling concurred in his article on causes of the Civil War in Lancashire that the sabbatarian controversy was one of the major grievances motivating puritans to revolt.<sup>10</sup>

Christopher Hill has found sabbatarianism useful in his study of seventeenth-century economic history. He explained that 'protestants and especially Puritans elevated the Sabbath, the *regular* day of rest and meditation suited to the regular and continuous rhythms of modern industrial society: they attacked the very numerous and irregular festivals which had hitherto marked out the seasons'.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, social historians have expanded on a notion insinuated by Heylyn and repeated by Collier.<sup>12</sup> This concept, called by some the 'puritan reformation of manners', portrays puritans, thwarted in their efforts to purify the national Church by the queen and bishops, turning to moral reforms on the local level; attacking the excesses of popular culture, the problems of bastardy, and profanations of the Sabbath. These moral reformers are alleged to have found support among constables and justices of the peace, through whom their concerns were translated into county and corporation orders. The use of sabbatarianism in this historiographical model is of great interest, for it lends further

<sup>8</sup> Samuel R. Gardiner, *History of England*, 10 vols. (London, 1883-4) III, 248.

<sup>9</sup> J. R. Tanner, *English Constitutional Conflicts of the Seventeenth Century: 1603-1689* (Cambridge, 1928), p.15.

<sup>10</sup> G. H. Tupling, 'Causes of the Civil War in Lancashire', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 65 (1955), 1-32 (p.13).

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964), p.146. While only cautiously treated in more recent works, Christopher Hill's thesis has become an essential part of any study on the Sabbath. See Solberg, *passim*; Patrick Collinson, 'The Beginnings of English Sabbatarianism', in *Studies in Church History*, edited by C. W. Dugmore and Charles Duggan, 1 (London, 1964), 207-21; Greaves, *passim*, Keith Sprunger, 'English and Dutch Sabbatarianism and the Development of Puritan Social Theology (1600-1660)', in *Church History*, vol. 51, no. 1 (March, 1982), 24-38.

<sup>12</sup> Collier, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 190.

support to the notion that this doctrine was a 'puritan' issue and part of their 'party' agenda.<sup>13</sup>

While one need not deny the value of previous studies of sabbatarianism, there is a problem of emphasis which runs through all these works. Although most historians have acknowledged a medieval background to sabbatarian concerns, they have not taken seriously the existence of a developed sabbatarian doctrine which predates the Reformation. Professor Collinson expressed the view of many when he observed that 'the novelty of the new Sabbatarianism lay in the insistence that the strict observance of the Sabbath was a perpetual necessity, part of man's moral obligation'.<sup>14</sup> But it is impossible to isolate Elizabethan sabbatarianism from its medieval origins.

Complaints against the abuses of Sunday were an English concern throughout the Middle Ages, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This practical concern that the day was misused by working and recreations, was justified by a developed sabbatarian doctrine, based on the fourth commandment and other portions of scripture. Medieval sabbatarianism was promoted by preachers, incorporated into episcopal and secular discipline, and represented in popular art.

The Elizabethan Church restated the long-established sabbatarian teachings of the pre-Reformation era. Complaints against Sunday abuses and the promotion of this doctrine were not limited to 'puritans', but included archbishops Parker, Grindal, Whitgift, and Abbot, as well as Richard Hooker, John Cosin, and many other prominent Church leaders. Episcopal concern is evident from the writings of bishops, their visitation articles, and the enforcement of sabbatarian orders in the diocesan consistory courts. Extreme sabbatarians were censured by both 'puritan' leaders and bishops. The Hampton Court Conference in 1604, which accentuated many differences between Church authorities and precise protestants, revealed a common concern for the reformation of sabbath abuses. A careful study of the Lancashire *Declaration of Sports* controversy of 1617 reveals that James was

<sup>13</sup> Keith Wrightson, 'The Puritan Reformation of Manners' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1973), *passim*.; Keith Wrightson, 'Alehouses, Order, and Reformation in Rural England, 1590-1660', in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914*, edited by E. and S. Yeo (Harvester Press, Sussex, 1981), 1-27.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London, 1967), p.436.



not hostile towards a religious observance of Sunday, but desired to see that his subjects had recourse to lawful recreations after divine service. This was not a 'party' issue; for while some 'puritan' sabbatarians endorsed the use of recreations after divine service, Archbishop Abbot opposed the king's declaration. Evidence from the Elizabethan and early Stuart parliaments reveals enthusiasm for strict sabbatarian bills in both the Lords and the Commons. It was not until the early 1630s that an active anti-sabbatarian campaign was launched by a small group of Laudians, who claimed that Sunday observance was a human convention, and that its use was defined and regulated by the Church authorities. While their intention was to emphasize episcopal authority and defend Archbishop Laud's role in re-issuing the *Declaration of Sports* in 1633, their anti-sabbatarian assertions remained a minority view, even among Laudians. The archbishop's harsh suppression of ministers who refused to read the declaration led many Englishmen to conclude that wickedness was being defended by the king's edict while good Christians were being persecuted. Many of the ministers suppressed exhibited none of the recognized traits of 'puritanism', except in their desire to see the Sabbath observed religiously. Yet given the orthodox nature of sabbatarianism, their dissent should not be regarded as 'puritan' reaction, but the opposition of the faithful to a novel teaching which contradicted God's law and the traditions of the English Church.

Because this work challenges a long-established and cherished historiographical orthodoxy, it is important to state explicitly what is not being questioned. This study does not deny the special attention given to this issue by precisionists – especially Elizabethan presbyterians. There is also no attempt to minimize the sharp differences over the extent of this observance: the length of the sabbath day, the activities to be used, the recreations to be avoided, and the institution of Sunday as the Lord's day.

However, this work does challenge the commonly accepted view that the doctrine of a morally binding Sabbath was a late Elizabethan, 'puritan' innovation that divided precisionists from conformists. It also questions the notion that this doctrine was used in a 'puritan' conspiracy to undermine the authority of the established Church. Rejecting the assertion that this doctrine was a long-standing source of tension, this study reveals that

sabbatarian doctrine and discipline were used as a theological football during the 1630s, in efforts to justify two different visions of the English Church: in support of the reformed tradition with its emphasis on scripture as the ultimate authority; and in defence of a 'catholic' vision, with Church authorities recognized as interpreters and arbitrators of doctrine and discipline. The irony is that the defenders of this 'catholic' vision resorted to fraudulent means, distorting the doctrinal tradition of the English Church.

It has become fashionable to talk of the pre-Laudian English Church in terms of consensus rather than conflict, and there is a danger in shifting from one unexamined model to another. Nevertheless, consensus is suggested in Elizabethan and early Stuart evidence; for the tensions which did arise concern peripheral issues and not the doctrine of a morally binding Sabbath. The theological works of Church leaders, as well as the sabbatarian discipline promoted by bishops in their dioceses and in parliament confirm the place of this doctrine in the English Church. Unfortunately, Heylyn succeeded in identifying the Church with a position which conflicted with the orthodoxy of the period, resulting in the perpetuation of a historiographical error for 350 years.