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0521520231 - Established Church, Sectarian People: Itinerancy and the Transformation of English Dissent, 1780-1830

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Excerpt

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I · The Established Church and English Separatism

IN MAY 1660 an important declaration of religious intent by Charles II, king in exile, then at Breda in the Netherlands, was read to the assembled members of the English Parliament. In the most famous passage of the declaration the king acknowledged the divided state of religious opinion within the country and expressed the conviction that free discussion would resolve many of the differences: ‘... we do declare’, he wrote, ‘a liberty to tender consciences, and that no man shall be disquieted or called in question for differences of opinion in matter of religion, which do not disturb the peace of the kingdom’.¹ Already more than a century had elapsed since the acceptance of Protestantism, and in the intervening years, as the declaration noted, a bewildering range of belief had surfaced in English society offering religious alternatives which seemed increasingly to challenge the basic pretensions of the national church.

The English version of the Reformation, which reappeared after the unsettled years of Mary Tudor, was conservative in its approach to theology and worship, territorial in organization and, above all, monopolistic in its claims upon the religious allegiance of the nation. The reformed Church of England remained the only recognized ecclesiastical body within the realm. Like the majority of European leaders in the sixteenth century, English monarchs, ministers and ecclesiastical dignitaries accepted without question the idea of a single, undivided Church coterminous with civil society. Unlike the Continent, however, England did not experience the bitter factional struggles which marred the religious development of later sixteenth-century society. But the absence of confessional warfare did not imply any greater regard for the principle of religious toleration.²

Between 1549 and 1559, interrupted only by the short-lived return to Catholicism under Mary, three Acts of Uniformity were entered upon the statute-book, each designed to prescribe a form of worship and to ensure by means of penalties the minimum of deviation from the new devotional practices. Yet the success of the new order was by no means instantaneous. For many of Elizabeth’s subjects the 1560s and 1570s represented a period of uneasy readjustment to the new patterns of worship. Professor Bossy, who assumes for the sake of statistical analysis the existence of a radical break between the earlier Roman order and the religious settlement

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of Elizabeth I, is careful to qualify the abruptness of the transition. He points to the ambiguity of those who in the period immediately following 1559 can be identified as continuing Catholics. Most conducted their religious affairs with a mixture of outward conformity to the new religious Establishment and private devotions according to traditional observance, earning in the process the abusive epithet 'Church-Papists'.³

Though the Elizabethan Prayer Book of 1559 with its restoration of traditional ceremonial and eucharistic language may have gone some way towards lessening the alienation felt by convinced Catholics, ardent Protestants detested the apparent return to popish practices implied by the latest set of liturgical changes. Under the Act of Uniformity passed in the same year members of the clergy who refused to use the new Prayer Book and its prescribed forms faced a range of penalties extending from limited fines and prison sentences for first offences to complete forfeiture of spiritual preferment and even to life imprisonment. Nor did dissentient parishioners escape unpunished, for the terms of the act dictated that every subject of the realm was to attend church on Sundays and holy days on pain of ecclesiastical censure and the exaction of twelve pence for every offence.⁴

At the start of Elizabeth's reign those who raised their voices in religious protest were not to any significant extent questioning the principle of establishment. Religious controversy within the Church of England concerned the degree to which old forms of worship and organization ought to be retained. The influence of international Calvinism especially over those who had fled into exile during the Marian persecution produced a generation of leaders whose preoccupation was with the achievement of a thoroughly reformed national Church free of superstitious practices; an ecclesiastical body that would exercise effective godly discipline throughout society, especially with regard to the administration of the sacraments and observance of the Lord's day. The views of this group contained inherent contradictions. On the one hand its members were prepared to recognize just authority and to treat the Church in non-sectarian fashion as a mixed community of saints and sinners. On the other hand they quickly showed themselves willing to criticize and resist the unjust use of power and to apply strict religious standards to the whole of life. They functioned as an inner circle separated to some extent from the mass of English society.⁵ As the Puritan convictions held by individuals hardened into a formal position, a struggle for supremacy began to take place between those who followed the queen and episcopate in espousing traditional Catholic forms, and those who preferred the more austere Presbyterian ideal subsequently expounded by Thomas Cartwright. The chief problem for Elizabeth was that of securing from the latter group a proper acceptance of the 1559 formulary.

In order to be effective legislation on uniformity needed the support of

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internal discipline. The first significant move in that direction came in March 1566 with the promulgation among the clergy of Archbishop Parker's *Advertisements*. This document, which was produced in response to royal concern at the current diversity in religious ceremonial, consisted of a series of articles issued without specific royal approval. It insisted upon unity of doctrine and ceremonial and prescribed clear practical rules for the proper administration of public worship including the sacraments, and for the general conduct of the clergy. Preaching was to be restricted to those properly licensed by their bishop. The appropriate dress for ministers saying public prayers, administering the sacraments or conducting other rites was deemed to be the surplice. All communicants were to receive the sacrament in a kneeling posture.⁶ Many may have disliked Parker's injunctions but comparatively few pressed their objections to the point of open defiance. Those that did were deprived of their livings.

Parker's *Advertisements* sought to protect internal uniformity, but a more serious development, the gradual appearance of alternative gatherings of Protestants outside the liturgical forms and buildings of the Church of England, the emergence of the religious conventicle, was not explicitly proscribed until 1593. In that year under the guidance of Archbishop Whitgift a harsh law was enacted against those who attended or encouraged others to attend 'any unlawful assemblies, conventicles, or meetings, under colour or pretence of any exercise of religion' to the neglect of the worship of the Established Church. Conviction under the act carried with it a mandatory prison sentence, release being dependent upon a declaration of conformity and attendance at divine service. After three months those who still refused to conform faced a choice between exile or punishment as a felon by means of forfeiture with no 'benefit of clergy'.⁷

Despite the comparatively late appearance of this statute the authorities had already begun to take action against those who were exploring alternative forms of worship. By the end of 1587 a number of London dissidents were languishing in gaol, their leaders John Greenwood and Henry Barrow being executed early in 1593 for the allegedly seditious character of their writings.⁸ Their approach to religion seemed incompatible with the concept of a national Church. But in spite of repression religious Separatism with its independent conception of the Church became from this point onwards a serious and permanent feature of English religious life.

Although the Separatist views of Greenwood and Barrow arose directly from their own dissatisfaction with the Church of England, there are signs of a shadowy connection with earlier expressions of religious protest. The roots of English Separatism stretch back into the mediaeval period, to the poor preachers of the Lollard tradition, gaining a measure of encouragement from Radical ideas from the Continental Reformation which had made their way

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by means of trade contacts and exile to London and the south-east corner of England. Not only did Separatist conventicles spring up in the clothing communities of northern Essex, in the Kentish Weald and among the towns and villages of the Chilterns in the very places which had earlier been centres of Lollard activity, but the Kentish and Essex groups showed clear signs of theological influence by Continental Anabaptism, especially the teachings of the Christological heresiarch, Melchior Hoffmann.⁹

In spite of this very early appearance by Separatism one of the most obvious features of the English Reformation was its comparative unity. Unlike the situation in the German cities and principalities or in some of the Swiss cantons where the Reformation gave rise to a threefold division between traditional Catholicism, Magisterial Protestantism and Radical groupings, the English Church managed to negotiate the ecclesiastical watershed with few outward signs of schism. Unity was encouraged by the existence of a strong national government which decided as early as 1533-4 to reject Roman pretensions to authority.¹⁰ It was also fostered by the relative isolation and insularity of English society and the consequent lack of influence by Continental Radicalism outside the south-eastern counties.¹¹

Serious religious dissent was in consequence slow to develop. Where it did appear its chief preoccupation was not with matters of theology but with the nature of the Church, its relationship with the State and with society at large, and with the concomitant matter of internal organization and government. Most Protestants at odds with the leadership of the Church of England were Calvinists and desired only the removal of those aspects of religious life and organization that were redolent of the old order. They hoped for the replacement of episcopacy and the prelatical accoutrements of religion by a Presbyterian system of government based upon the centrality of the Bible rather than sacraments, the essential equality of ordained ministers, and a graded system of ecclesiastical assemblies. The territorial character of the Church, its monopolistic position in society and its co-operation with the secular authorities would have remained to all intents and purposes unchanged. Only when the reforming impetus showed signs of failing in the face of episcopal intransigence did some of the more determined Puritan elements turn towards the Separatist ideal.¹²

From the time of Greenwood and Barrow a number of English Protestants held the view that membership of Christ's Church was a voluntary matter. They believed that the Church consisted of those who gave their willing assent to its discipline, and that the exercise of biblical rules alone should govern their continuing membership. At the close of the sixteenth century those who adopted this radical viewpoint represented only a small proportion of the group which disliked the Elizabethan Settlement, yet their ideas

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contained ominous and far reaching implications. Their concept of membership clashed with the traditional view of the Church as a territorial body, a notion which had survived the Reformation almost unaffected and which seemed to most contemporary minds to be an essential ingredient in the cultivation of a Christian society. The emphasis upon voluntarism raised even more delicate issues including the proper allegiance to be expected by the State from its subjects, the extent of the power to be exercised by that body over the conscience of the individual believer, and the precise basis of authority, whether prescriptive or derivative. The latter question was to become especially important during the turbulent years of civil war in the 1640s when Protestant Dissenters of various kinds gave their allegiance to the parliamentary cause.

The fragmentation of English Protestantism had also economic causes. In his recent study of English Dissent Dr Watts suggests that there were important social differences between those who gave their wholehearted support to established religion and those who seceded from it. He points out that unlike the Puritan movement very few landowners embraced Separatism. Gervase Neville of Ragnall in Nottinghamshire was one of the rare exceptions. Religious dissent was associated characteristically with economic mobility. The Separatist congregation to which Greenwood and Barrow belonged was composed of two distinct groups: one whose members, in some cases as former clergymen, had received a university education and another much larger body of artisans which represented a wide variety of trades. Despite the discrepancy in education and status they shared a common familiarity with urban life, they possessed an important degree of economic flexibility, their skills were to some extent geographically transferable and at first many had active contacts with the Continent.¹³ English Separatism was to retain its urban complexion throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thriving most successfully in the comparatively unsupervised society of the pre-industrial town.¹⁴

If Protestant divisions had been slow to develop in the sixteenth century the same could not be said of the Stuart era. The mid-seventeenth century saw the first peak of non-established religion as Separatist congregations began to multiply in the wake of the parliamentary army. A variety of theological views appeared during the Civil War and Interregnum. Contact with the Continent produced the first English expressions of Fausto Sozzini's anti-Trinitarian rationalism. A number of radical army chaplains in the parliamentary cause contrived to push traditional Calvinism to equally heterodox conclusions of an antinomian character. The heady uncertainty of the Commonwealth inspired others to emphasize the millenarian aspect of Christian teaching. Ideas poured out of the ecclesiastical melting-pot as Quakers relying on the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit offered an

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alternative source of authority to that provided by Church or Bible, and a variety of sects sought to apply egalitarian criteria to the structure of Christian society.¹⁵

The corollary of these outpourings was a growing belief in religious pluralism; a desire for the acceptance of diversity in the realms of faith and practice. In spite of the austere reputation acquired by the Cromwellian interlude, the Commonwealth and Protectorate gave England its first taste of genuine religious choice exercised within an overall climate of toleration.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the brevity of the experiment and the Draconian legal measures enacted in the wake of the Restoration to end the sectarian divisions, which in the mind of High Churchmen provided a visible reminder of the connection between the sins of schism and regicide, the accession of Charles II merely confirmed the permanence of non-established religion. The Presbyterian element, hitherto contained within the Established Church, was compelled by the Ejectment of 1662 to come to terms with its position as an unintentional component of English Dissent. Ten years later many Presbyterian congregations had abandoned the dream of belonging to a thoroughly reformed version of the Church of England. The demise of that aspiration came finally in 1689 with the failure of the Comprehension Bill.¹⁷ From that point onwards English Protestant Dissent included within its ranks both traditional Separatists and the lineal descendants of the Puritans.

For those outside the Anglican fold 1689 marked the attainment of a significant measure of religious toleration. Yet it also heralded the beginning of a slow decline into obscurity and theological introspection. It was the latter rather than continuing legal restrictions, heterodoxy or even the strength of the Established Church which led to the withering of the Dissenting community in the course of the eighteenth century.

Even after the passage of the Toleration Act substantial restrictions upon religious freedom remained. Those affected were required by law to register their places of worship and to ensure that only officially recognized preachers conducted public services.¹⁸ In the civil sphere the sacramental test acted as a barrier to the more lucrative and prestigious public offices, although after 1745 the passage of annual indemnity acts mitigated the worst effects.¹⁹ Those who openly espoused Unitarian ideas were denied the protection of the Toleration Act.²⁰ Behind the smiling facade of the 1689 act lurked the spectre of penal legislation enacted in the Stuart era; statutes which were still capable of inspiring individuals to interpret the law in a manner calculated to harm Dissenting interests. The records of the London committee of Deputies demonstrate unequivocally that in spite of the complacent atmosphere of the early Hanoverian period many infringements of Dissenting rights took place. The offences ranged from the refusal to marry or bury church members and attempts to prosecute ministers and schoolmasters for

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running independent schools and academies, to cases of riot, disturbance and even arson directed against the property of individual congregations.²¹

Deviant theological opinions, whether openly heterodox²² or extreme in their logical conservatism,²³ offer a persuasive explanation for the dwindling of many eighteenth-century congregations and the dearth of ministerial candidates. But the frequent secessions of orthodox worshippers from heterodox congregations and the vigorous debate aroused in Northamptonshire by 'the Modern Question'²⁴ suggest that the more overt manifestations of rational thought may have exercised a healthy influence upon belief by way of stimulating reaction. The real problem lay elsewhere, in the matter of isolation. The very strength of independency, the internal cohesion of the gathered church, became its weakness as geographical remoteness conspired with autonomy and lack of common purpose to foster numerical decline.

If the history of eighteenth-century Dissent was that of toleration followed by decay, the course of the national Church was marked by a similar discrepancy. Outwardly strong and confident the religious Establishment contained within it the seeds of popular alienation and ineffectiveness. In 1736 when William Warburton wrote his classic account of the alliance between Church and State, the Church of England was approaching the height of its formal power and influence. The bench of twenty-six bishops operated within the House of Lords as an important constituent of the process of government. Intellectually the Hanoverian Church retained the respect earned in the previous century by the theological contribution of the Caroline divines and the powerful sermons of Tillotson and Stillingfleet.²⁵ That earlier momentum was maintained throughout the difficult years which followed the reign of Queen Anne by the effective philosophical rebuttal of Deism. The English Church met the challenge of rationalism with little if any sign of the antagonism seen in France between religious and secular viewpoints.²⁶ The situation in England, despite the presence of an ecclesiastical establishment, drew favourable comment from no less a critic of state religion than Voltaire on account of its tolerance and lack of persecuting zeal, characteristics he was inclined to attribute to the breadth of religious practice allowed under the Hanoverian monarchy.²⁷

Yet even such distinguished Gallic approval cannot conceal the more negative elements. The absence of persecuting zeal owed much to the general spirit of complacency. Toleration of religious diversity merely masked the decline of the territorial ideal. The intellectual prowess of eighteenth-century apologists has to be set against the unemotional coldness of public worship. Episcopal prominence in the political arena diverted attention from the loss of effective leadership within the Church. To the modern observer instances of mob support contrast sharply with the much wider failure to understand and respond to the popular appeal of

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Methodism. Most important of all in the longer term, close identification with the State appeared with hindsight to entail a dangerous degree of erastianism.²⁸

Most Hanoverian Churchmen followed Warburton in regarding the religious Establishment as resting upon a compact between two free and equal sovereign bodies for their common benefit. 'Such', he argued, 'is the nature of that famous union which produces a Church Established, and which is indeed no other than a political league and alliance for mutual support and defence.'²⁹ The erastianism which to nineteenth-century critics seemed implicit in this relationship appeared to Warburton in a different guise; as the guarantee of security, disciplinary power and influence in the life of the nation.³⁰

At first sight the Glorious Revolution may appear to have brought about a reduction in the independence of the English Church. As if to confirm this impression the future primate, William Wake, in his reply to Francis Atterbury's High Church plea for the summoning of Convocation (a request granted during the reign of William and Mary) showed himself prepared to subordinate the authority of the ecclesiastical courts to that of Parliament.³¹ Yet the level of erastianism expressed in the Revolution Settlement and even by theorists such as Wake was nothing new. Charles II and James II between them had ruled for twenty-four years without recourse to Convocation. The fatal act of submission by the Church had occurred much earlier, in 1664, when Archbishop Sheldon had surrendered to Parliament the traditional right of the clergy to tax themselves. With the disappearance of this vestige of autonomy any remaining necessity for the later Stuart monarchy to summon Convocation had vanished.

The essential difference between the post-Revolutionary position of the Church of England and that which obtained earlier was not one of increased erastianism, so much as change in the nature of the political power to which the Church was subject.³² Prior to the accession of William and Mary authority was prescriptive, being seen to repose in a divinely appointed ruler. With the rejection of the Stuart dynasty in the bloodless coup of 1688 control of ecclesiastical as well as secular affairs passed in some measure to the will of Parliament. Royal fiat was replaced, especially after the reign of Queen Anne, by the corporate decision-making of Lords and Commons. The preference for the Stuart monarchy expressed by the more conservative section of the clergy merely obscures the fact that the new political circumstances did not immediately signify any practical increase in secular interference.

There were, nevertheless, ominous portents of things to come. In 1717 the king in order to deal with internal dissensions among the clergy and to prevent a formal confrontation with the government silenced the indepen-

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dent voice of the Church by the simple expedient of proroguing Convocation.³³ From then on the only official medium for the expression of ecclesiastical opinion was the House of Lords where matters affecting religion vied with other issues for the attention of government. During the early years of the Hanoverian monarchy the practical implications of erastianism became obvious as the bench of bishops was increasingly transformed into a special group of political functionaries.

The effect of the secular role of the bishops upon the Church was highly ambiguous. On the one hand their corporate presence in the Upper House ensured that they were able to exercise greater political power than at any time in post-Reformation history. Eighteenth-century parliaments met regularly, and as a result of the Revolution Settlement their authority was far greater than that of their predecessors. The bishops with their tendency to act unanimously constituted an important block vote in a chamber which rarely had more than 145 members in attendance.³⁴ Their influence was particularly important at a time when politics tended to be characterized by factions rather than formal parties.³⁵ Benjamin Franklin, noting the unequivocal support given by the bishops to Lord North in his preparations for war against the American colonists, observed bitterly: 'Twenty-four bishops with all the lords in possession or expectation of places, make a dead majority which renders all debating ridiculous.'³⁶ The bishops, remaining as they did in London throughout the parliamentary session, ensured at least from one point of view that on matters of national concern the Church's voice was heard, if not in its own right then at least in the decisions taken by Parliament.

Against this positive interpretation the expectation of political loyalty and service severely circumscribed the exercise of spiritual leadership within the Church of England. The operation of patronage promoted an unseemly scramble for translation to wealthy sees. The demands of patrons both in London and at the local level served to divert the attention of bishops from their administrative and spiritual responsibilities, encouraging perfunctory attention to such important duties as diocesan visitation, confirmation and the examination of ordinands. One of the most notorious cases was that of the Latitudinarian bishop, Benjamin Hoadly. During his six-year incumbency of the see of Bangor, Hoadly, who was a cripple, only once visited his remote, mountainous and entirely unsuitable Welsh diocese, and then only by sea.³⁷

Close integration with politics and the ruling class may have compromised the Church's leadership but the vitality of the religious Establishment was also sapped by economic malaise. Lay impropriation of ecclesiastical revenues was directly responsible for the abject poverty of many parochial livings. The efficient functioning of the priesthood depended upon a secure

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base of tithes and endowments, but the reforms carried out by Henry VIII, whilst stripping impropriated revenues from monastic foundations, had merely delivered these assets into lay hands, thus consolidating the problem of alienation. Professor Best has estimated that more than 50 per cent of eighteenth-century benefices belonged to lay patrons, a fact which had a direct bearing upon the economic condition of the parish clergy.³⁸ The financial status of vicars varied widely depending upon their right to the greater and lesser tithes, but the class of stipendiary curates, by far the most numerous clerical category, suffered almost universal impoverishment. As well as inadequate remuneration many lacked security of tenure either by the design of the patron or by their own neglect to obtain an episcopal licence.³⁹ The condition of the ordinary curate spoke eloquently of the need for further reform.

The end product of the remorseless drain upon resources was a parochial system whose abuses mirrored the failings of the higher clergy. By the establishment of Queen Anne's Bounty in 1704 for the redirection of the Crown's exactions of first fruits and tenths towards poor livings some attempt was made to rectify the ill effects of secular control, but the ad hoc nature of the distribution system, with its reliance upon the lot, and the inadequacy of the sums available meant that little impression was made upon the overall problem.⁴⁰ Indeed, in at least one diocese there are signs that towards the end of the century the situation was growing worse.⁴¹ While there was no automatic guarantee that higher salaries alone would ensure a more effective parochial ministry, the root of the problem lay in the impropriation of tithes. They were regarded in common with advowsons as a species of private property and, therefore, in Hanoverian eyes as being inviolable.

By the 1790s the practical weaknesses associated with financial stringency were obvious to critics and supporters of the Church alike, even though the tension provoked by events in Europe prevented the application of any significant remedies. Pluralism was endemic in the English countryside. Curates, both fully priested and at the preliminary stage of deacon's orders, were in a permanent and impecunious state of over-supply. As a consequence aspiring candidates competed for the doubtful privilege of serving country parishes at a level of remuneration which made it necessary to unite the work with the cure of one or more neighbouring livings.

The financial hardship of the lowest sector of the clergy can be illustrated from the visitation returns of many dioceses. The enquiry form sent to incumbents in the Norwich diocese at the triennial visitation held in 1794 included a typical section dealing with the employment of stipendiary curates. Section VII of the form enquired of incumbents: 'Have you a licensed Curate residing in your Parish? or what Distance from it? What is his Name? What Salary do you allow him? Doth he serve any other and what