

CEREMONY AND
COMMUNITY FROM
HERBERT TO MILTON

*Literature, religion, and cultural conflict
in seventeenth-century England*

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This book attempts to understand the religious conflicts of the English Revolution. How could people feel so strongly about religious ceremonies that now seem insignificant? Sir Thomas Browne remarked at the outbreak of civil war, “I would not perish upon a Ceremony, Politick point or indifferency,”¹ and we might share his bewilderment at those who would risk martyrdom rather than perform the contested ceremonies, or those who, on the other side, would fight to preserve them. In order to understand the larger human and cultural (rather than more narrow theological or political) significance of these religious conflicts, we need a better grasp of the symbolic meanings of the conflict over worship – and of what religion meant to people in early modern England. A reevaluation of seventeenth-century religious conflict demands a reinterpretation of seventeenth-century literature, so much of which is concerned with religion.

Revisionist historians stress continuities in seventeenth-century England rather than revolutionary change, but there persists a sense that the seventeenth century constitutes a crucial period in the emergence of the modern world. Many have felt compelled to understand the transformations that have left their mark on Western culture. The seventeenth-century conflict over religious worship provides insight into the process and significance of these cultural transformations, for it involved a struggle between competing ideas of order. As we shall see, the religious beliefs that collided in the battles over ceremonial worship comprised two different ways of ordering experience: one based on notions of unity, wholeness, and hierarchical integration; the other based on a principle of division, opposition, and difference. I wish to untangle the human and ethical implications of these cultural conflicts, whose legacy continues to define cultural conflicts in our own time.

In the current era of literary and cultural studies that looks to material explanations of experience and behavior as well as phenomena – when it does not discount the possibility of coherent causative explanations – “religion” has been understood in terms of power politics, when it has not been discarded as an outmoded, uninteresting subject of inquiry. I want to argue for a new attention to the function of religion in seventeenth-century England, where religious beliefs, values, and institutions were interwoven with most aspects of society and experience. In spite of gradual secularization, religion was a powerful and pervasive determinant of social and political relations, as well as of the material experience of individuals, some of whom were corporeally and financially punished for voicing or openly practicing their religious beliefs. In the conflict over worship, we see how deeply religion determined texts and experience in seventeenth-century England, shaping cultural as well as individual values and identity.²

Religion was not, of course, the sole cause of either the English Revolution or the broader cultural upheaval of the seventeenth century. The issues involved in England’s civil war are multiple and complex. Historians have debated what causes or explanations of the Revolution are most compelling, and consensus seems impossible. Surely political and socioeconomic factors are undeniable.³ Nevertheless, many historians see religion as an important cause of the war. John Morrill has emphasized the mobilizing power of religious conviction. The debates in Parliament in the early 1640s about religious reform show the power of religious motivations. Conrad Russell observes that, though religion did not “cause” the war, “the parties were divided by religion.”⁴ Without denying interrelations among religious, political, and socioeconomic matters, I focus attention on the role of religion in the belief that conflicts over worship were an integral part of, and an important index to, the cultural disruptions of seventeenth-century England.

The period of the mid-century revolution and the years surrounding it has seen considerable interest recently among historians and literary scholars. Historians have been reexamining the early Stuart church and the emergence of Laudianism. Religious conformity is finally receiving serious attention.⁵ But the discipline of history does not address the kinds of broad cultural questions that interest me. The new historicism of seventeenth-century literary studies has explored the political and cultural engagement of literary

texts, showing how they are rooted in their particular historical moment. Religion, however, has been largely neglected, though there are signs of change.⁶ Still, even when religion has been the object of attention, the emphasis has been on politics when it was not on theology. Radical religion and puritanism have been of most interest as they are believed to counter traditional hierarchies and a repressive dominant ideology, and as they seem precursors for modern political activism. This interest perhaps reflects not just a secular but a Protestant bias – evident in Christopher Hill’s groundbreaking books and even in Keith Thomas’s monumental *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, which relegates Catholic thinking to superstition. As Christopher Haigh has observed, much of the “history” of religion in England has been written from a perspective that assigns a questionable inevitability and progressivism to Protestantism.⁷ Such a bias has also affected the interpretation of seventeenth-century devotional literature. Reacting against earlier twentieth-century readings which privileged Anglo-Catholic traditions, present critical fashions have preferred reformist to high-church poetry, Milton to Donne, and have even reread Herbert or Donne as vigorously Protestant. Assessments of seventeenth-century “religious literature” have often seemed to reflect scholars’ commitment to one version or another of Christianity, or to a modern, rationalist secularism.

I seek to reexamine religion and literature in seventeenth-century England without privileging either an anti-ritual or a ritualist ideology, exploring how *both* ideologies could be variously empowering and repressive. Puritan ideology and the ideology that privileged ritual and ceremony need to be understood in relation to each other, as both had a significant place within the established church, and as each defined itself in contrast to the other. In order to understand the full import of the religious conflicts, we need a better understanding of the function and significance of religious thinking, but first we must think about religion in broader, less exclusively political or narrowly theological terms.

I understand religion to be a cultural system expressing the symbolic logic of a society. Religion defines not only a world view but society’s construction of human identity and of social relations.⁸ Though religion was inseparable from politics in the seventeenth century, its significance cannot be comprehended by narrowly political terms of analysis. Some of the contested issues – such as

whether the priest should make the sign of the cross in baptism – may look trivial to us, but they were symbolic of conflicts over some of the most fundamental issues that shape human experience. Conflicting ideas about “true worship” involved not simply rival conceptions of God, but conflicting constructions of human (and Christian) identity and of personal, social, and political relations. That these ideas about worship affected practices and material aspects of life is evidenced by the “puritan” desire to limit Communion to the “godly” (thus restricting what really counted as “humanity”), as well as by the efforts of Archbishop William Laud and others to enforce conformity through fines and corporal punishment. My interest is not in how they imagined God, or what they believed about the afterlife, but in religion as an ideology and practice involving human beings in relationship with each other.⁹

In the controversy over ceremonial worship, we see two different conceptions of the “order of existence” – what I call “puritan” and “ceremonialist” ideologies. Though a broad spectrum of opinion existed in the early seventeenth-century English church and a shared faith united English Protestants,¹⁰ sharp disagreements over worship brought to the surface fissures within English Protestantism. These religious conflicts reveal different structures of thought, feeling, and behavior which signify not only divisions within the church, but conflicts and discontinuities within seventeenth-century English culture and society so profound that they could not be settled by war or legislation.

Historians have discredited the older view that religious problems in the period were caused by a “puritan” opposition to an “Anglican” establishment, pointing out that at least through James’s reign many puritans were part of the establishment, that Calvinism had been the dominant theology, and that there was a range of acceptable religious views within the English church. Allegiances in this period were flexible and shifting.¹¹ It has been argued that “puritanism” was simply a more enthusiastic kind of Protestantism, hardly alien to the church and, for some historians, the most vital part of it. It has become a new orthodoxy to downplay the differences between “puritan” and what formerly was called “Anglican” Protestantism. Nevertheless, recent work has qualified the notion that the early Stuart church was characterized by harmony and consensus, and shown increasing tensions within the English church.¹² I argue that close examination of the texts of the escalating

controversy over ceremonial worship reveals radically divergent constructions of experience. As it was the ceremonies rather than theology that divided the church, the controversy over ceremonies most clearly reveals these differences. So long as ceremonial conformity was laxly enforced, ideological differences could coexist within the church. But once conformity was rigorously insisted on under Charles I, those differences were intensified. Generalization and categorization perhaps inevitably involve oversimplification, yet a markedly different set of assumptions separates those defending ceremonial worship from those attacking it.

I use the terms “puritan” and “ceremonialist,” recognizing their limitations, but with a sense of their usefulness in designating different religious ideologies. Historians recognize the existence of increasingly polarized religious positions in the late 1620s and 30s, but do not agree on what to call them. I use these terms to refer not so much to distinct parties as to distinctive ways of understanding experience. Neither the “puritan” nor the “ceremonialist” ideology is unitary – articulated by multiple voices, they could encompass a range of emphases. Moreover, a person could be divided between ceremonialist and puritan impulses, as we shall see.

Peter Lake suggests that “puritan” distinguishes “relative religious zeal,” and refers to “those advanced protestants who regarded themselves as ‘the godly’, a minority of genuinely true believers in an otherwise lukewarm or corrupt mass.”¹³ But the term also might stand for a set of shared values and assumptions about religious worship and practice. Those engaged in advancing or defending ceremonial worship labeled people critical of these practices “puritans” as a term of abuse. As a term of opprobrium, “puritan” came to include Calvinists who had formed the orthodox mainstream of the Elizabethan and Jacobean church, as well as those who wished further reform in the church. While rejecting the hostile intent of the term as used by Laudians, I use “puritan” to refer to those who not only embraced some form of Calvinist theology but wanted a “purer” kind of worship than presently existed in the English church, a worship purified of supposedly idolatrous ceremonies. The term is appropriate in its focus on the concern with purity that marks this religious ideology. To call this ideology “Calvinist” over-emphasizes the theological issue of predestination. Moderate Calvinists could support ceremonial worship even though they were unenthusiastic about Laud and his program. The conflicts were not

simply doctrinal, between Calvinist predestinarianism and Arminianism, but about matters of worship that themselves sometimes involved doctrinal issues.¹⁴

I use the term “ceremonialist” to designate the position of those who embraced the English church’s rituals and ceremonies, partly because the term “Anglican” has been discredited as anachronistic, perhaps most accurately used to describe those who remained loyal to the Prayer Book and episcopacy after 1642.¹⁵ Though puritans mocked the proponents of ceremony as “formalists,” “ceremonialist” more properly points to the centrality of the ceremonies – of worship involving the body – in their religious experience. In designating the anti-puritan position about worship, I prefer “ceremonialist” to “anti-Calvinist” or “Arminian,” which (like “Calvinist”) focuses on the single issue of predestination, or to “conformist” which emphasizes only the matter of conformity. “Laudian” at times is appropriate, since it encompasses a whole set of attitudes and beliefs.¹⁶ But there were also clergy who shared the ceremonialist values that were part of Laudianism but disliked or distanced themselves from Laud’s rigors. Many people unenthusiastic about Laud’s program valued the ceremonies of the church and the Prayer Book. These people sought to preserve the worship of the Church of England during the civil wars, and they account for the ease with which the church was reestablished.¹⁷ What matters, of course, is not the labels but the identity of these two ideologies, which should be understood not as logically worked out positions (though for some they were) but as distinctive sets of mental and emotional attitudes, of assumptions and beliefs, that have an internal coherence, representing and shaping human experience and practices. These ideologies were competing for dominance not only in the church but in English culture and society. The ceremonialist ideology in part revived a Catholic mentality, while puritan ideology fostered the religious sects and socially transgressive prophets that appeared in the 1640s and 50s, who were as troubling to conservative puritan orthodoxy as to adherents of the ceremonial worship of the Church of England. A full analysis of radical religion – and of the lingering presence of Catholicism in England – is beyond the scope of this book, as is the relation of women to these religious ideologies. Nevertheless, my discussion of ceremonialism suggests its Catholic affinities and I indicate where radical religion develops features of puritan ideology. Certainly Milton, who is the focus of the last part

of this book, bears witness to certain radical implications of puritan ideology.

If one goal of this book is to define the cultural significance of religious conflict in seventeenth-century England, the other is to show how imaginative literature functioned in this conflict. I bring together cultural history, the history of religion, and formalist analysis in the conviction that the better we understand the history and culture of this period, the better readers we are of its literary texts – and perhaps vice versa.

Religious controversies about worship made literature itself contested, for they raised the question of the legitimacy of “human invention.” The defensiveness about art that we see in seventeenth-century literature grows out of these concerns, as does the preoccupation with art’s role in society, which was particularly intense for poets hoping to create a lasting poetic monument in a culture suspicious of idolatry. But seventeenth-century literature addressed other aspects of the religious conflict, both directly and indirectly, particularly as religious ideologies were not simply a set of theological doctrines, but constitutive of what it meant to be “human” and of a whole range of human and social relations.

This book offers new readings of literary texts by George Herbert, Robert Herrick, Sir Thomas Browne, and John Milton. I also refer to other writers, especially John Donne, whose sermons from the mid- to late 1620s are self-consciously positioned in the escalating conflicts over ceremonial worship. But given the range of Donne’s writings, and the interpretive challenges posed by his “conversion” from Roman Catholicism, full examination of his relation to religious conflict must await future study.

Written from the 1620s through the 1660s, these literary texts span devotional and secular poetry, meditative essay, prose polemic, epic, and closet drama, but they are linked by a concern with ceremony and worship. All of these texts confront the conflict over worship in ways that are not always obvious to twentieth-century readers, but that would have been clear to contemporaries. To some extent, these texts embody religious conflict simply as they bear the imprint of the culture. Sometimes, however, they more actively engage these conflicts.¹⁸

Herbert, Herrick, Browne, and Milton all publicly took stands in relation to the Church of England. Herrick, Browne, and Milton

published their most creative works when the religious practices they were committed to had been declared illegal and punishable. A shared sense of religious oppression links writers separated chronologically as well as by religious conviction, in an England that repeatedly saw those in power prohibit the religious practices of others with different beliefs. Perez Zagorin speaks of the strategies of “dissimulation,” “equivocation,” and “lying” that developed in response to religious persecution in early modern Europe. Zagorin’s work, which complements Annabel Patterson’s on rhetorical strategies for avoiding censorship, should alert us to the presence of covert religious stances in the “literary” and poetic writing of mid-seventeenth-century England, much of which grows out of an experience of living under conditions where certain forms and expressions of religion were restricted.¹⁹

Imaginative literature, especially poetry, illuminates the significance and impact of these seventeenth-century religious conflicts, revealing what was at stake in the cultural battles over religion. As cultural artifacts, they are inscribed by the ideologies and socially constructed values of seventeenth-century England; but they also show writers reexamining these cultural values and critically reflecting on changes within English culture and society. Herrick and Browne are not simply spokesmen for a conservative order, any more than Milton is merely a voice for puritan orthodoxy. The impulse to see texts as entirely culturally or ideologically determined seems the modern secular analogue of a Calvinist predestination that takes away human volition and agency – and, as Milton intuited, makes change for the better impossible.

This book focuses on the period of Charles I and the English Revolution, though it extends beyond 1660 to acknowledge the effect of the Restoration and to include Milton’s late poetry, the most complex and extended poetic engagement with the issues of religious conflict over worship. I first examine the conflict over ceremonial worship during the reign of Charles I, showing how puritan and ceremonialist ideologies diverged over a range of interrelated issues, defining human identity, experience, and sociopolitical relations in quite different ways. Ceremonialist ideology valued the ties to the past, the submission of the individual to humanly instituted power, and the analogous connection of body and soul within the human being. It privileged ceremony and art as they effect and symbolize

these things. In contrast, puritan ideology separated the spiritual from the carnal, the present from the supposedly corrupt, contaminating past, rejecting ceremony and the traditions of the past as pollutions that must be expelled. If ceremonialism, under Laud, was repressive of individual liberty in constraining behavior to conform to and support the established sociopolitical hierarchical order, it might also be argued that in rejecting ritual, which anthropologists believe is essential to social relations, puritan ideology inevitably (if unwittingly) weakened the social fabric. It denied the legitimacy of the power of the past and its traditions to determine the present, and the analogous legitimacy of humanly constituted power to bind the worship of the individual believer, and thus loosened the bonds (both enabling and constricting) that tie the individual to society and to the continuum of history.

The rest of the book shows how such an understanding of religious conflict alters how we read seventeenth-century literary texts and transforms our sense of their significance. I first examine Herbert's *Temple*, published the year Laud was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. *The Temple* privileges the Eucharist and ceremonial worship, yet a puritan distrust of art and "human invention" shapes the anxieties of Herbert's poetry. Addressing issues already present in the church that were soon to become hotly contested, *The Temple* seeks to contain dissonances within the English church. Yet it is because Herbert's poems so thoroughly inscribe ideological tensions within the church that they have encouraged divergent, contradictory readings, both in the seventeenth century and in our own.

Subsequent chapters deal with literature whose involvement with the issues of religious conflict is often less immediately obvious, more oblique. Concerned with the role and interdependence of art, ritual, and ceremony in human civilization, not just within the church, Herrick's and Browne's writings display a distinctly ceremonialist mentality disturbed by the implications of puritanism. Herrick's *Hesperides* bears an interesting relation to Herbert's *Temple*. At a time when the rituals of the Church of England had been outlawed by acts of Parliament, Herrick turned to poetry as the place where ceremonial worship and its values could be preserved. His "paganism," his impulse to expand the boundaries of religion, and his sacrifice poems – all have a distinctive, polemical religious significance.

Browne's *Religio Medici* embodies, stylistically and conceptually, ceremonialist notions of harmony, order, and integration in the face

of disorder and division – ideals that find almost parodic expression in *The Garden of Cyrus*. But *Urn Buriall* provides his most philosophical, complex, and powerful exploration of the value of ceremony as a distinguishing mark of human existence. Browne articulates the feelings that allowed the English people so eagerly to embrace the restoration of the liturgy in 1660, yet his skepticism about the value of ritual shows the impact of puritan ideology on even those most attached to traditional forms.

Just as ceremonialist and puritan ideologies demand to be understood in relation to each other, so “ceremonialist” and “puritan” writers need to be read against each other. Thus Milton occupies the attention of the rest of this book. The cultural values represented by Herrick and Browne are precisely the ones Milton attacked. Though Milton separated from orthodox puritanism, the puritan concern with idolatry shapes all his writing. His major poems reveal both the value and cost of puritan individualism. But *Paradise Lost* also shows Milton’s puritan stance complicated by his effort to find a place for the body in worship. We see in him the persistence of desire for ceremony, for a ritual experience that might integrate body and spirit and connect human beings.

Reading these literary texts in terms of the religious conflicts that divided England reveals otherwise unrecognized meanings, solves longstanding cruxes, and clarifies authorial intentions. It not only illuminates the contested function of literature but helps us understand in a more precise and interesting way what it means to say that religion permeated most aspects of English life and culture in the seventeenth century. We see how the aesthetic, the domestic, the political were all charged with religious significance, how religious ideological value was figured in a variety of social, personal, and even erotic relations. Finally, the literature that engages the conflict over worship has relevance to pressing concerns in our own time, when the past is often thought to be irrecoverable, unknowable, irrelevant, and when the role and function of the arts in the culture seem uncertain, contested, and even (to some) on the verge of extinction; when religious ideologies continue to prove a divisive force in the world, and when recognition of various human and cultural differences poses an acute challenge to the survival of any sense of human community.