Introduction: spirit and circumstance in Caroline Protestantism

In the decades of the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, authors attempting to secure English Protestant orthodoxy against its critics undertook something more daring in the process: a rich and complex inquisition into the wide cultural constituents of religious experience itself. By and large, these writers were less interested in articulating a core of doctrine than they were in exploring and testing the very conditions in which their faith was imagined, situated, and lived. From the publication of Bacon's last works in the 1620s to the culmination of the Civil War in 1648, a spectrum of writers took stock of what they tend to call the "circumstances" of their faith, a term that ranges in meaning from the "pomp and circumstance" of religious heroism and ritual to the analysis of the modes of reverential thought itself. In these years, the term "circumstance" was applied to the spiritual, social, and legal constituents of a "person" as well as the cosmic or natural order enveloping a person. Carried out in print, in small communities, from the pulpit, on stage, and at court, the Caroline reexamination of English Protestant orthodoxy certainly generated its own versions of dogmatism, but its main tendencies leaned toward the intensive, probing scrutiny of the matrix of religious experience, lending support to Thomas Browne's contention that dogmatic appearances notwithstanding, "the wisest heads prove at last, almost all Scepticks."[1] Whatever their dogmatic way-stations, that is, these "heads prove" inventive seekers after the historical, imaginative, ritualistic, social, epistemological, and natural conditions in which English Protestantism tends to lapse, struggle, and thrive.

In part, this stocktaking of the "circumstances" of English Protestantism was prompted by the Caroline writers' sense that their "true religion" was increasingly humiliated by fleeing nonconformists and besieged by foreign papists. Both these rival groups accused the Church of England of becoming mired in the casuistry of circumstance. But the critique of circumstance carried out by a wide spectrum of English

Protestant writers took aim at something much more familiar within the boundaries of what William Laud called the "hedge" and George Herbert the "double moat" of the church – namely, the criteria for assessing the sometimes mundane and palpable, sometimes elevated and elusive, conditions and instruments mediating God's gracious dispensations. At times, one circumstance of faith might be explored in isolation from all the others. A writer might review the conditions of religious heroism through the lens of recent developments in warfare, in colonization, and in the decoration of the church, or survey the past and future of the English church, the "circumstance of time." The habitually doubting conscience of these revisions often doubles as experimentation: thus Caroline assessments of the failures of recent Protestant heroics fertilize the intellectual and spiritual ground of such rich and unusual communities as Great Tew and Little Gidding.

But in Caroline religious discourse, one circumstance often leads to another. For instance, the search for the criteria of a heroic Protestant faith dovetails with debates over the status of ceremony in worship, a matter that reticulates with the interior workings of fancy and the senses, and generally with the newly sophisticated analysis of the epistemology of religious experience. In turn, this exploration of the benefits and liabilities of "fancy" in the practices of the church converges with the studies of the social category of the "person" – studies with far-reaching implications for Christian notions of social decorum or hierarchy, of ministry, and of the evidence for salvation. All the circumstances of faith – heroic, epistemological, cultic, and social – tend to merge in the extraordinary rereading of the Book of Nature carried out in the years after the launch of Bacon's Great Instauration. Adapting Seneca's notion that the *pneuma* surrounds or "stands around" us all, Caroline Protestant writers assemble all the other conditions of their faith as they rethink the constituents of nature and the methodology of natural philosophy. That is, the most explosive catalyst for the Caroline stocktaking of the state of English Protestantism is the study of that circumstance that challenges the centrality of the human condition itself in the landscape of God's providence – the circumstance of nature.

Despite the casuistic and interrogative thrust of so many Caroline writers, the stocktaking quality of English Protestantism in these decades has often been overlooked on the part of those church historians who seek to celebrate Caroline religion as the very "spirit" of Anglicanism or to vilify it as the corruption of that faith. Until the recent work of Achsah Guibbory and Kevin Sharpe, a major reason for such equally

extreme, if contradictory, distortions of Stuart religion in the second quarter of the seventeenth century was that scholars commonly limited "religion" far too narrowly and apportioned their methods along rigid disciplinary lines.[2] Literary critics stuck mainly to poems and fictions, historians restricted themselves to sermons, visitation reports, and other "documentary" evidence. Meanwhile they often reduced the category of religion to narrowly doctrinal concerns, usually with the teleological aim of explaining the Civil War (1642–48) and its explosion of radicalism.

But the Caroline emphasis on the circumstances of English Protestant faith demands that the range of texts under consideration be expanded, together with the category of religion itself. As Guibbory has written, religious disagreements in the Caroline period must be understood in a "larger human and cultural" context than a "more narrow theological or political" focus will allow; what is more, this larger cultural understanding requires that the scholar gain "a better grasp of the symbolic meanings of the conflict over worship," which demands "a reinterpretation of seventeenth-century literature, so much of which is concerned with religion" (1). "Religion" comprises not just matters of salvation and worship but also the conflicts found in ethics, social dynamics, epistemology, and natural studies. Or, as Guibbory puts the point, Caroline authors understood that their religious conflicts "involved not simply rival conceptions of God, but conflicting constructions of human (and Christian) identity and of personal, social, and political relations" (4).

The best way to unpack the Caroline investigations of a broadly defined set of religious circumstances involves bringing to bear on English Protestantism a reorientation that Kevin Sharpe has urged on historians of early modern politics: "to pay attention to the representations that contemporaries presented of (and to) themselves," making sure that historians and literary critics join forces in an examination of "discourse and symbols, anxieties and aspirations, myths and memories" (*Remapping*, 3). Between 1620 and 1648, the "wiser heads" assessing and representing the circumstances of orthodox religious experience would not have agreed with some twentieth-century historians that their vein of Protestantism was so pure as an alchemical "spirit" or so debased as the devil incarnate. As William Chillingworth would argue in 1637, somehow the greatness of English orthodoxy was wrapped up with its fallibility. At the same time, recusant and nonconformist writers situating themselves outside the orthodox fold of English Protestantism boldly objected to a circumstantial religion, and even took action to remove themselves from its slough. But in their efforts at separation, recusants and nonconformists

found in powerful and painful ways that the highly imperfect conditions of their faith could not be elided. They too came to terms with the imperfections to which the Caroline stocktaking of the circumstances of Protestant faith testified, and at which a rhetorically attentive study of that religious culture must take its aim.

I

It is Archbishop Laud, impeached and on trial for his life, who perhaps most emphatically insists on a careful assessment of religious circumstance. On the nineteenth day of his trial, he answers the charge "'that at the High-Commission . . . I did say that the Church of Rome and the Protestants did not differ in fundamentals, but in circumstances.'"[3] Allowing then setting aside the possibility that he, like anyone involved in theological speculation, might simply and earnestly have erred in this assessment, Laud proceeds to explain that it is wrong to minimize the value, weight, and status of circumstances, to assume that they matter little:

> Thirdly, these two learned witnesses [Burton and Lane] (as they would be reputed) are quite mistaken in their very terms. For they report me, as if I said, 'not in fundamentals, but in circumstantials;' whereas these are not *membra opposita*, but fundamentals and super-structures, which may sway quite beside the foundation. (4.336)

Laud is ready with examples of those circumstances, neglected by or unknown to his opponents, "that many times . . . in religion do quite destroy the foundation. For example: the circumstances are these: *Quis? Quid? Ubi? Quibus auxiliis? Quomodo? Quando?*" Skipping the personal "who," Laud commences with the more clearly fundamental "what." "Place" seems less promising at first, "a mere circumstance; yet to deny that Christ took our flesh of the B. Virgin, and that in Judea, denies the foundation, and is flat Judaism." The means of belief – "by what helps a man believes" – can lead to heresy if one overemphasizes human self-sufficiency, a matter of central importance in the Antinomian trials held in Massachusetts, while a question of time, again "a mere circumstance," might arise in one's refusal to believe "that Christ is already come in the flesh," a position that "denies the foundation utterly, and is flat Judaism, and an inseparable badge of the great Antichrist, 1 John iv." Revisiting his favorite circumstances of place, time, and means, those sacraments and ceremonies so basic to his vision of the church, Laud reminds his examiners that each one of them considers the rite of

transubstantiation a crucial instance of the intersection between foundation and circumstance. Indeed his language almost reverses the normal order in positing that such a rite is fundamental "upon the bare circumstance of *quomodo*," a point in keeping with his casuistical rule "that some circumstances *dant speciem*, give the very kind and form to a moral action" (4.337).

If Laud wants to ensure that his "Puritan" critics appreciate the pivotal role of circumstance in salvation, worship, and moral action, recusants deride Laud's church for being mired in fanciful, ecclesiastical, and epistemological accidents – indeed, never so forcefully as in the 1620s and 30s when, as some Catholics scoff, the Church of England has putatively discovered its own deficiencies and is desperate to repair them. In the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, advocates of the Church of England are deeply committed to the investigation of religious circumstance as the most pervasive and pious level of religious experience. But critics of their church have a strong conviction that the bog of circumstance is stagnant and debased, filled with the debris of the world's vanity fair. For these critics, a focus on circumstance amounts to cunning policy at best, and hapless perplexity at worst.

For the advocates of orthodox English Protestantism writing in the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, the conditions of English Protestantism are not newly distilled into some purer form; "circumstance" is not narrowly political, and not reducible to policies foisted on the public by a king's ideological obsessions and personal paranoia. Rather, this generation of English Protestants produces a far-reaching and exploratory reckoning of the lived conditions and imaginative categories of their rich but beleaguered faith.

Throughout the twentieth century, some very brilliant scholars of the English religious imagination between 1625 and 1648 have tended to reduce or ignore the inquisitive complexity of Caroline religious discourse. Sometimes reduction is ideological: advocates of "Anglicanism" have distilled the very spirit of their faith into a world view attributed to the "Caroline divines." In one famous instance of this scholarly alchemy, *The Structure of Caroline Moral Theology*, H. R. McAdoo never explains why his distillation of the spirit of seventeenth-century "Anglicanism" – and really that of the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries as well, perhaps simply "Anglicanism" for all time – should be called "Caroline." The royal name is dropped from the title and contents of McAdoo's 1965 book, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century*. But the later book is written very much as an extension

of the former, and both together on the foundation of a 1935 anthology compiled by Paul Elmer More and Frank Leslie Cross, *Anglicanism: The Thought and Practice of the Church of England, Illustrated from the Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*. With no more explanation than McAdoo provides in 1949, More and Cross conclude their volume with a section devoted to "Caroline Piety."

Sometimes reduction reflects a polarized state of scholarship: since the 1980s, the advent of the so-called Tyacke thesis, which argues for the hegemony of "anti-Calvinism" in the Caroline church, has lassoed scholars into a debate over the putatively core doctrine of English Protestantism under the rule of Charles I and William Laud. Still other scholars of English Protestantism have recoiled from what they consider the tyranny of state religion in the 1620s and 30s. In 1992, a compelling vilification of Caroline Protestantism was published, Julian Davies's *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism, 1625–1641*. Davies's title conceals no mystery: his book is dedicated to the argument that far from distilling the spirit of English Protestantism, "Carolinism" held that spirit hostage and amounted to "a very weird aberration from the first hundred years of the early reformed Church of England."[4] In contrast to McAdoo, for whom the "Carolines" represent English theology "at the apogee of its splendour and virility" (*Structure*, 13), Davies believes that the evangelical mainstream of earlier English Protestantism – "the more enthusiastic, evangelical type of Protestants" – was marginalized and suppressed by a king whose policies distilled an elixir of political ideology tragically poisonous to reformed spirituality.

Suspecting that the "spirit" of his "Carolines" has something to do with circumstance, McAdoo allows that "Sanderson . . . repeatedly stresses the importance of circumstances in cases . . . The phrases 'circumstances duly considered' and 'the infinite variety of human occurrences' are a thought never far from Sanderson's mind" (*Spirit*, 42–43). But in both of his books, McAdoo emphasizes how the "Caroline" divine examines then escapes the clutches of mere circumstance. Such a divine offers a practical and rational method governed by a humbly skeptical search for truth rather than doctrinaire systems; preserves scripture in its undeniable prominence and avoids arid rationalism and legalism; and marries critical freedom of judgment and wise obedience to authority in an eclecticism that nonetheless produces something of great permanance and observes the difference between fundamentals and *adiaphora*. Moreover, this divine knows when to be tolerant, when rigorous, and he is balanced

in his optimism about human educability; is committed to the ancient and visible church but also to the modernized study of nature as part of a nexus of resources for religious devotion and method; is defined in habits of thought less by changing historical circumstances and personal idiosyncrasies than by those moderate qualities shared by the gathering at Great Tew, the Cambridge Platonists, Hooker, Andrewes, Laud, Sanderson, and Taylor, the latitudinarians and the new philosophers, and of the latter especially those of the Interregnum and Restoration; believes in a God more wise than willful and in accordance pursues holy living in action and discourse rather than subtle theological controversy; and builds guidelines for the average Christian by way of response to social, theological, and moral circumstances in what McAdoo calls their "relevance to the conditions of reality."[5] Historical circumstances only vaguely matter for McAdoo's alchemy. They are either the private, unknowable vicissitudes of daily living or the briefly listed parade of major events (314) that forced the otherwise peaceful "Anglicans" into controversy. In *Spirit* as in *Structure*, Charles I makes only a brief appearance.

For Julian Davies, however, Charles is the starring antagonist whose villainy consists of imprisoning the true spirit of English Protestantism. If for McAdoo Charles is a fleeting embodiment of the Anglican *pneuma*, for Davies, rich instances of Caroline spirituality such as Little Gidding matter only to the extent to which they supposedly enter Charles's imagination. And the king's is not an imagination for which Davies cares much. It is the narrow, self-serving, yet aggressive imagination of a paranoid tyrant, whose "obsessive drive [was] to eradicate 'profanity,' 'popularity,' and disorder" (3). Superimposing an ideology of sacrosanct kingship on the evangelical mainstream of English Protestantism, Davies's Charles is a lawless interloper whose chief ministers – while in considerable agreement with the king's desire for uniformity, reverence, and decency in worship – prefer more lawful and flexible modes of operation.

Recent "revisionist" historians are wrong, Davies argues, in maintaining that the conflicts developing into civil war were bureaucratic rather than ideological or that the Arminians upset a Puritan status quo. Before Charles, Davies believes, Puritanism was indeed the *locus amoenus* of clergy high and low, of monarchs and people alike; it was an English Protestantism dedicated to supplementing the ordinary means of spirituality with such other godly means as lectures and prophesyings. The revisionists are right, then, in their argument that the 1620s and 30s were critical years of conflict for the English church. Not Laud and the Arminians, however, but an atheological Charles and his personal magnification of

a Davidic ideology were responsible for forcing good peaceful Christians into resistance. His target was, if not spirit, at least vital claims on the Holy Spirit, for Charles aimed "to marginalize and anathematize the most vital force within the Church as sectarian and subversive" (10). In a sense, Davies implies that McAdoo was right to emphasize the moral theology of Caroline spirituality; only, the king's is a moral standard of deference and sacralization that took its excuses from the jurisdiction of the temple but sought the utter destruction of any suspected enemy of a numinous court and a priestly monarch. What is more, virtually everyone was suspected – of disloyalty, irreverence, and anarchy.

For Davies, it is Charles (not Laud) urging the reissue of the Book of Sports; it is Charles (again, not Laud) who is obsessed with the rail and with altar policy. Both Charles and Laud want visible forms and accoutrements that will secure and manifest deference, order, and unity; but when attempts are made to bring iconoclasts, nonconformists, and the Scots into line with these ideals, it is Charles and not Laud who has no sense of tact, accommodation, or law. Concerned mainly with the status of the church and clergy and with lay interlopers in their domain, Laud is left to distort the truth in order to keep favor, minimizing the extent of nonconformity and maximizing the success of the royally mandated crackdown.

This last point – that Charles was basically out of touch with the religious realities that he sought so fervently to contain and to shape – raises a big question for the understanding of English Protestantism in the 1620s and 30s: what does it mean to say that the king, his ideology, and the policies that diffused it "captivated" the vitality of the church? Even if there is truth in Davies's compelling yet polemical argument about Charles, how much does it matter – for religion as practiced at Little Gidding, for example – what Charles had in mind or in store for "the Church"? It seems obvious that Charles's "personal stamp" was only one of the constituents of the religious imagination in the decades of his rule and that, as one sees with Little Gidding, this royal constituent had a way of contributing to the richness of contemporary spirituality, partly in the various and quite extraordinary reactions against the king's official ideology and partly in service to or imitation of his ideals. Davies values – but regarding the 1630s hedges on – the survival of the English Protestant mainstream. On the one hand, then, Charles's oppressive policies are said to be "illusory," unable to effect the reduction of the church that the king so fervently desired; on the other, these desires and policies are compared to a cancer so that whatever the vitality of religious culture

under his rule, Charles infected the church and made it very difficult for godly ministers and lay people to remain healthy (171).

Davies is as little interested as McAdoo, then, in discussing the rich and various stocktaking of Protestantism in the 1620s and 30s. In *The Caroline Captivity of the Church*, a powerful chorus follows Laertes in rejoining that "the King, the King's to blame." When he sets aside Charles, Davies demonstrates as clearly as anyone the many practical variations that operated within the loopholes of policy. But variation in Caroline spirituality underwhelms Davies. Laud, who stayed away from court, nonetheless (Davies argues) was too indebted to Charles, too legalistic, and too paranoid himself to enjoy loopholes very much. No doubt he was having the nightmares recorded in his diary in large part because of the perils of high political and religious office under Charles. What about everyone else? Davies devotes an entire chapter to Arminianism and at times concedes a point that McAdoo resists, namely, that the intricacies of *ordo salutis* mattered to some Caroline religious writers. But his stress is unproductively on the overemphasis that soteriology has received from Nicholas Tyacke and the critics of his position that the Caroline church was overrun by "anti-Calvinists." It is Davies's tendency to insist that where Arminian questions of divine decree arose in the 1620s and 30s, the middle part of the spectrum was more commonplace than the polarities, the debates were nothing new, they were always subsumed by other ideological divides (to which in any case they have a relationship so uneven as to render it meaningless), and Charles only wanted to get rid of doctrinal controversies anyway.

Whether or not Charles "destroyed" or "captured" Caroline spirituality, Davies ironically follows in the footsteps of his least favorite king. For his is a book obsessed with policy rather than the exploration, opposition, or for that matter the middle ground that survived together with, despite, and against Charles's illusions of power and Laud's dreams of control.

In making a more positive case for Charles I, Kevin Sharpe's *The Personal Rule of Charles I* is much more attentive to the richness of the Protestant imagination in the years leading up to the Civil War. Sharpe concurs with Davies that order, decency, and conformity mattered more to the king than "fine theological distinctions," but unlike Davies, he assigns to the monarch religious motives that were at once a sign of "personal faith" and not altogether repellent to the English people. The faith of his Charles is not unlike the Caroline spirit of McAdoo's Anglicanism, pietistic and moral rather than theoretical and subtle. This

Charles is capable of theological debate but not interested in it, for he fills his life – both private and public – with ceremonies of sincere devotion.[6]

If there is a spirit to Sharpe's Caroline Protestantism, it is concocted with far greater parish-by-parish archival effort than McAdoo's, and with greater sensitivity to the nuances of rhetoric in which ideas are represented. Sharpe's key metaphor for his method of gaining access to this spirit is a tour rather than a concoction. For Sharpe, the variety of local circumstances *is* spirit, and the Caroline religious imagination is shaped by historical circumstances without really investigating the categories of circumstance. Unlike McAdoo, who showcases Sanderson's casuistry of circumstances but wavers on the relevance of factual change for the Anglican spirit, Sharpe honors historical circumstance with pride of place in the titles of one part ("'A Turn of All Affairs': Changed Circumstances and New Counsels") and one chapter ("'The Greatest Measure of Felicity'? Conditions and Circumstances") of his book. But in large part, his use of "circumstance" is not ideational but topical and narrative. It features "events . . . unfolding – or not unfolding"; the fluctuating factors and priorities of policy; diplomatic maneuvering or "developments"; and material conditions. Sometimes it comprises the category of, "we might say, psychological circumstances." The latter range from the template of the "royal mind," with its "grammar of order, reform and efficiency," to the more widely spread perception of policies, whatever the political circumstances of their administration. But unlike some of his other works, which focus on the representation of ideas and ideals, Sharpe's *Personal Rule* is so intent on redeeming Charles and Laud that what Caroline writers imagined is usually a way of revaluing what they in fact lived. As in Davies's book, ideas are studied most often in the grammar of policy and in the uses of and responses to that grammar. So it is that Sharpe can ask the incisive question about Charles, Laud, and their relationship to Puritanism: did they "create the threat they had imagined?" (603–05, 732).

II

The Caroline religious imagination flourishes neither as the reified spirit of Anglicanism nor as the local permutations of policy but in its explorations of the conditions and circumstances of a Protestant life of faith. Given their tendency to believe that certainty derives mainly from outward conformity rather than from theological dispute, Charles and Laud might warrant the label of skeptics. But skeptical religious thought