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978-1-107-63370-4 - The Puritans in Power: A Study in the History of the English Church from 1640 to 1660

G. B. Tatham

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PRELUDE

THE brief period of Puritan ascendancy which succeeded the Great Civil War forms the concluding phase of what has generally been regarded as a distinct epoch in English ecclesiastical history. But though a revolution which saw the overthrow of episcopal government, the abolition of the liturgy of the English Church, and the deprivation of a third of its ordained ministers is obviously a subject which cannot be described without reference to the events which preceded it, yet the whole history of the Puritan movement is so complex that an attempt to summarise the causes and tendencies is a task of no ordinary difficulty.

One is faced at the outset by the question of terminology. The name "Puritan," by which we are accustomed to designate the forces which lay at the back of a great religious and social upheaval, is itself full of pitfalls, because it was and is used to describe tendencies of thought, superficially alike, but really distinct. In the first place, its most common use in modern language draws attention to that aspect of its meaning which is historically the least important. To modern ears the word naturally suggests the dour look and the sombre habit, familiar in fiction and in art, as typifying an austere code of morals and a harsh and narrow outlook upon life. But though this view of Puritanism as a social and moral force is a direct

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inheritance from the sixteenth century and is true, to a certain degree, of what then came into being, the word had another and an historically older signification which is apt to be forgotten. Primarily the Puritans stood for purity in church life rather than for purity in personal life or conduct, which was thought of as a corollary. Their demand was for a complete reformation, for the abolition, in matters of religious worship and ecclesiastical government, of all that had been superimposed upon primitive forms.

So much may be premised of the Puritans, but when one seeks to define their position more accurately, generalisation at once becomes hazardous. For Puritanism was not a creed endowed with defined dogmas and a constructive ecclesiastical policy; it was rather an attitude of mind which expressed itself not in one form only or with an equal degree of insistence. As a constructive force, Puritan thought in England was destined to follow two main lines of development, the Presbyterian and the Independent, but while it is to some extent inevitable, in speaking of the earlier phases of Puritanism, that one should employ these names for purposes of distinction, it is important to guard against the error of ascribing to movements in the embryonic stage the characteristics by which they ultimately came to be known, and of assuming the existence, from the beginning, of doctrines which were in fact only gradually formulated. The end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries was essentially a period of evolution in religious thought, and it was only by degrees that opinions began to run in well-defined channels. Presbyterianism, of course, became at an early stage a recognised model of ecclesiastical government, but it would be untrue to say that English Puritanism, under Elizabeth and James I, was represented

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by a Presbyterian or an Independent party. The body of Puritan feeling in the country had not at that time become identified with any party or parties: it existed rather as an influence which directed men's minds more or less forcibly towards a further reformation in the Church. For the present purpose it will be more instructive to analyse the fundamental principles which characterised its two main currents.

The key-note of the Puritan position was the acceptance of the Bible as the one infallible authority before which all institutions in the Church must stand or fall. To some extent this attitude was common to the whole Reformation movement, but whereas the more moderate reformers had been content to do away with all that seemed contrary to Scripture, the Puritans went further and demanded the abolition of all for which the Bible offered no positive warrant. In this lies the explanation of their attitude towards the ecclesiastical system which was being built up in the English Church. It explains their dislike of the hierarchy, for even if some form of Episcopacy could be traced in the New Testament, the same could not be said of deans and canons; it explains also their attitude towards the festivals of the Church and indeed towards all non-primitive institutions which the Reformation in England had not finally abolished. On this, the destructive, side Puritan feeling was tolerably unanimous and definite. Here, however, unanimity ended, for it is in their theories of ecclesiastical government, of the functions of the ministry and of the relation of the Church to the State that the differences between the two great Puritan parties become apparent. On the one hand, Presbyterianism, as the name implies, rested upon a system of government by presbyters or elders, under which the congregation is controlled by the ministers and elders whom it has itself elected, the

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collection of congregations in a district by the Presbytery or Classis composed of ministers and elders, and the whole country by a General Assembly. It claimed authority from the constitution of the primitive Church, as revealed in the books of the New Testament, and it owed the form in which it was established after the Reformation chiefly to the work of Calvin. The system is essentially national; it recognises the jurisdiction of a supreme power, and in this lies its fundamental difference from the Independent theory.

The Independents, like the Presbyterians, sought their model of Church government in the New Testament, but while the attention of the Presbyterians had been directed towards the governmental machinery, they had been influenced by the example of the self-sufficing and autonomous churches which sprang up in the wake of missionary enterprise<sup>1</sup>. Carrying out the principle which they perceived in the position of those churches, they claimed that the individual congregation had full power to elect its own officers and to manage its own affairs and that it owed obedience to no authority save that of its Master.

Intimately connected with these theories of government within the Church were the respective views of the relation of the Church to the civil power. The Presbyterians, with the theocracies of Old Testament history before their eyes, endeavoured to build up a polity in which the secular authority should be strictly subordinated to the Church. In this respect their teaching resembled that of the Romanists and stood in marked opposition to the growing Erastianism in the English Church. The Independents, on the other hand, in this less faithful to scriptural tradition, while they

<sup>1</sup> See the Independents' Catechism published by M. C. Burrage: *The Early English Dissenters*, ii, 156-7.

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repudiated State control and the institution of tithes, were debarred from the assertion of ecclesiastical supremacy by the absence from their system of any supreme ecclesiastical authority. With them the ultimate triumph of right principles would be secured by entrusting the State to a "rule of the saints," that is to say, government by men directly inspired by God. The idea of inspiration was common to both views, with the difference that the one conceived the gift of the Spirit as flowing mainly through an ordained ministry while the other held that it was subject to no such limitation.

A divergence of opinion upon a subject so important is naturally seen most clearly in the conception of the ministry. If the Church were the oracle of God, then the ordained ministers of the Church must be considered to occupy a position analogous to the Jewish prophets, and therefore the Presbyterian ministry was accorded a prestige which was probably greater than that enjoyed by the ministers of the Anglican Church. It was greater because in the Presbyterian system the sacraments did not possess so full a spiritual significance, and therefore the personal influence of the ministry, as the medium through which God's purpose was revealed, was relatively enhanced. With the Independents on the other hand, the fact of ordination was in comparison unimportant, and many of the most influential preachers were laymen. The essential question was whether a man were possessed of the spiritual gift, and it was the decision of this question which chiefly engaged the attention of the Committee appointed by Cromwell in March 1653/4 for the approbation of public preachers. This belief not only in the existence of direct inspiration, but also in the possibility of discerning its presence, explains much in the actions and utterances of Independent preachers which would otherwise be unmeaning.

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These points of difference in religious opinion, which were destined to become prominent during the constitutional and ecclesiastical experiments of the Interregnum, were dormant in the Puritanism of the years which preceded the Rebellion. In what relation did Puritan thought, thus diversified, stand to the system which was taking shape in the Church of England as by law established?

If it can be said that no clearly defined position can be postulated in the case of Puritanism before the Civil War, the same is to a great extent true of the Church of England, for it also was in the evolutionary stage. The Church was indeed established on the basis of episcopal government and was possessed of a liturgy and a code of doctrine, but the limits had not been defined so strictly as to exclude the Puritan altogether or so clearly as to avoid the possibility of controversy. It was this circumstance which gave the opportunity, as it provided the justification, of the Puritan attack. But the issue was from the beginning complicated by the fact that the purely religious problems in the conflict did not stand alone, but were, at all events during the critical period of the struggle, merged in questions of secular politics. In the second place, the religious problems themselves were not the outcome of an orderly development, but owed their very nature to the action of a series of opposite and mutually incompatible forces. The peculiar circumstances in which the Reformation was inaugurated under Henry VIII, the advance made under Edward VI, and the subsequent counter-Reformation under Mary were of themselves factors well calculated to render the religious question in England one of extreme difficulty, nor was the solution for the moment brought appreciably nearer by that famous venture in ecclesiastical politics which posterity has

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agreed to misname the Elizabethan “Settlement.” Up to that point, the broad issue had been the alternative between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant systems which had taken root on the Continent. From that point begins the movement towards the re-establishment of a Church, which should avoid either alternative and be national in a sense that one owing allegiance to the teaching of either Rome or Geneva could never be. The system was imposed from above and owed its foundation to the strength of the Government: both then and later the voluntary acceptance of it by the country as a whole was hindered by the fact that, while Calvinism and Lutheranism were recognised models possessed of a definite programme, the Elizabethan *via media* appeared as something new. Accordingly, it was never accepted by the more advanced Puritans as a final settlement, but only as an intermediate stage on the road to complete reform<sup>1</sup>, and the demands of the Puritan representatives at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604 really amounted to a claim that the English Church should be modelled on a Calvinistic basis<sup>2</sup>.

Such a claim received no more encouragement from James I than it had from Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s attitude had been dictated principally by motives of public policy; James’ experience had taught him that the claims of the Presbyterians accorded ill with his theory of kingship, but he viewed the question also from the standpoint of the theologian. At the same time, the position of the English Church became more clearly defined, and its anti-Puritan tendency more pronounced, by the broadening of its field of apologetics. On the one hand,

<sup>1</sup> Mandell Creighton: *Laud’s position in the History of the English Church* (Laud Commemoration Lectures), p. 8; H. O. Wakeman: *The Church and the Puritans*, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> H. O. Wakeman: *The Church and the Puritans*, p. 72.



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by appealing to the Fathers and the Schoolmen, and by developing the theory of the historical continuity of the English Church, its defenders definitely parted company with those who regarded the Reformation as a break with the past. On the other hand, the spread of the doctrine of Arminius among the more advanced divines of the Church of England set up a barrier against those who followed Calvin on the subjects of Grace and Predestination.

Throughout James' reign, nonconformity and separation were discouraged, but the general acceptance of the "orthodox" liturgy and system of Church government was due to the fact that the times still allowed a considerable measure of latitude. Scrupulous compliance was not rigidly enforced, and many even of the clergy were really Puritans at heart<sup>1</sup>. Under these conditions, open opposition was confined to a minority, and many who were lukewarm in their affection for Episcopacy and entirely hostile to extreme views, were prepared to accept the existing state of things, to set differences aside, and to turn their attention to a reformation of the religious life by means of a stricter discipline. But if separatism were deprecated, it is important to remember that freedom of thought within the limits of the Church was not the ideal towards which either party was striving. In spite of the popular cant about liberty for tender consciences, of which that age heard so much and understood so little, true tolerance was as foreign to the mind of the Puritan as it was to the "Anglo Catholic." The breaking-point would be reached when the extreme views of either side came into contact, and the struggle, when it arose, would be not for toleration, but for supremacy.

The accession of Charles I marked an important

<sup>1</sup> S. R. Gardiner: *Hist. of Eng.* 1603-42, iii, 241-2.



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point in the development of the ecclesiastical question. The new King had inherited many of his father's views on civil and religious policy and his unwillingness to brook popular opposition in either sphere, but he was in every way a more attractive figure, and if he possessed no greater capacity to rule in a difficult age, he yet brought to the task a real wish for his country's welfare, a deeply religious mind and the power to play the part of a king with dignity. His frequent want of judgment in a crisis was due partly to the fact that he was a man with no gift for statesmanship and partly to a fatal tendency to be guided by ill-considered advice and to select his counsellors rather on grounds of sentiment than of reason. His arbitrary conduct arose from his conception of the regal power, a conception which had been common to his predecessors and had yet to be proved impracticable. At the same time, it must be conceded that the problems with which he was called upon to deal, though identical in kind, had assumed a more serious aspect than they had presented in the preceding reign, and to this, rather than to any personal inferiority, must be attributed the fact that he did not succeed in avoiding failure where his father had only missed success.

It was during the first fifteen years of Charles' reign, and especially during the eleven years during which he governed without a Parliament, that the ground was prepared for the revolution in Church and State. On the side of the Church, the policy which the King sanctioned, and indeed encouraged, will always be connected with the name of William Laud.

Laud's rise, though he obtained his highest preferences late in life, was characteristic of the age in which he lived. It was founded in academic surroundings, and the presidentship of St John's College, Oxford,

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was the first step in his upward progress. He became Dean of Gloucester in 1616, Bishop of St David's in 1621, Dean of the Chapel Royal and Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1626, Bishop of London in 1628, Chancellor of Oxford University in 1629, and Archbishop of Canterbury, on the death of George Abbot, in 1633. Such, in brief, was his distinguished career, and, from the accession of Charles, it would not be too much to say that his was the ruling mind in ecclesiastical affairs. He was essentially an exponent of the "Anglo Catholic" school and, in point of doctrine, an Arminian, but the peculiar importance of his influence on the Church lay in his character and general attitude of mind.

At the time when he was called upon to assume a position of authority, there was much that gave cause for dissatisfaction to one who set a value on conformity and "decent dignified ceremonialism" in the services of the Church. Abbot, his predecessor in the see of Canterbury, was at heart a Puritan, and at the beginning of Charles' reign a majority certainly of the laity, and probably also of the clergy, were what may be called Puritan Episcopalians, that is to say, accepted government by bishops without sacrificing the Calvinistic opinions of the earlier post-Reformation period. Conformity, in fact, to the Church doctrine, as Laud conceived it, did not exist, and various and contradictory tenets were freely promulgated by the clergy. In external matters, the state of affairs was still more displeasing. Reports from the dioceses revealed that the churches in many places "lay nastily," the buildings dirty, and even the fabric in a ruinous condition<sup>1</sup>. The services were often performed without any regard to dignity or even decency, ministers were careless and "insufficient" in the discharge of their duties; the communion table not

<sup>1</sup> G. G. Perry : *Hist. of the Church of England*, i, 489.