

RELIGION 1640-1714

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The most obvious place to look for documents about religion is in the archives of churches. Much the most voluminous are those of the Church of England, supplemented by the papers of bishops and other clergymen. The Church's records are severely depleted for the period 1641-60, when church courts and then bishops were abolished and the Church effectively ceased to function as an institution. The records of Parliament's committees for plundered and 'scandalous' ministers in the 1640s, and of the triers and ejectors in the 1650s, provide some information, but in many respects there was no effective organisation above the parish level to generate records.¹ At the Restoration the old church apparatus was restored, but the Church now had to compete with new denominations which had emerged since 1640. Independents, Baptists and Quakers rejected the parish system and formed their own 'churches' or 'meetings'. Some drew up confessions of faith or codes of discipline, all became self-governing; some then formed nationwide organisations and generated their own records, most notably the Quakers. By contrast, documents on religion in the State Papers tend to have arrived there by accident, or to reflect the anxieties of state officials about the secular implications of religious activities, or are there because Anglican magistrates or ministers sought the help of the central government. As a result, there is most material when religious nonconformity was seen as posing a political threat, leading to persecution, most notably in the early 1660s and early 1680s.

Civil War and Interregnum 1640-60

Before 1640 almost all Protestants accepted the need for a single parish-based national church. However, they disagreed about the form of that church and disagreements became more bitter when Charles I and Archbishop Laud shifted the main focus of the service from the sermon to the liturgy, with a particular emphasis on 'the beauty of holiness' and holy communion, which people were to receive on their knees, before the altar. These changes were widely denounced as leading to 'popery', and radical Protestants (or 'puritans') responded by demanding the full-blown Protestant Reformation denied them by Elizabeth. Images, crosses and 'superstitious' church furnishings were destroyed and 'scandalous' (Laudian) ministers were replaced by 'godly' men. When Parliament entered into an alliance with the Scots in 1643 it committed itself to introducing some form of Presbyterianism, which at the very least meant abolishing bishops and banning the use of the Book of

Common Prayer. In 1644 Parliament also abolished the traditional Christian calendar, including the celebration of Christmas. Evidence of the response from within the parishes is patchy, but there were numerous instances of opposition to the new 'godly' ministers and to the abolition of Christmas. Some ministers continued to use the Prayer Book, while others were prosecuted by their parishioners for *not* using it.² Parliament failed to deliver on its promises to the Scots, introducing a watered-down, toothless Presbyterianism, with no system of discipline or government above the parish level. In the 1650s Cromwell's government attempted to bring reform to the parishes by improving the quality of the clergy, by a system of triers (who checked their educational and moral qualifications) and ejectors (who removed those deemed unsuitable). The parish clergy seem to have remained a mixture, including some who had sought ordination from former bishops, or used the Prayer Book, or both, some puritans who tried to establish a comprehensive parish ministry and discipline, and some who gave up on the ungodly majority among their parishioners and concentrated their ministry on a small 'inner ring' of the truly godly.

The parish system survived, despite calls to abolish the tithes which supported the clergy, but the parishes can not be seen as forming a national church, coherent in theology or practice. Meanwhile, from 1640 new 'gathered churches' began to form. In the 1630s, many puritans, denied godly preaching in their own parishes, 'gadded' to other parishes where they could hear a good sermon. In the process, they separated from their own fellow-parishioners and began to form new congregations whose membership transcended parish boundaries. This trend accelerated after 1640, as some of the godly dissociated themselves from the ungodly and the contamination which ungodliness implied. Whereas in theory everyone was born into the Church of England, these were voluntary associations of 'visible saints', keeping themselves pure in the expectation of an eagerly anticipated 'Second Coming' and Day of Judgment. Some centred on university-trained ministers serving as parish pastors, others formed independent congregations. The Baptists believed that a university training was not merely unnecessary for a good pastor, but detrimental: it cluttered up the mind and confused the understanding, instead of letting Christ's spirit work directly within the individual. Those called, by their members, to lead Baptist congregations (or 'churches of Christ') were distinguished by their spiritual gifts, not their educational qualifications. The Baptists were the first to publish a Confession of Faith, in 1644. Their churches were careful to check on the godliness of those who wished to join, and those who failed to match up to their exacting standards were admonished and, as a last resort, expelled. The Baptists also emphasised the

element of individual choice in joining a church by baptising new members, as adults, by immersion, as in the New Testament, and not as infants.

Conventional parish puritans were horrified by what they saw as the heresies and excesses of the gathered churches. Thomas Edwards, a minister, gathered all sort of stories about them which he published in several parts in his *Gangraena*: for him, they were a cancer, infecting and discrediting godly Protestantism. Worse was to follow, with the emergence of the Quakers. They developed the idea of the spirit within, the inner light, to argue that anyone - including women - could preach or prophesy, overcome the sin within, and become perfect. Conventional clergymen were frauds and parasites: their university studies immersed them in dead languages rather than the living spirit, and they preached for money. Quakers accepted that the Bible was the Word of God, but at some point in the past: it was now superseded by the inner light. Some claimed to perform miraculous cures, or speak in tongues, and others were shaken by the spirit within them (hence 'Quakers'). They described their campaign to awaken others to the light within them as 'the lamb's war' (Revelation 17, verse 14) and their approach was non-violent, but confrontational. Many challenged or berated parish ministers in their own churches, or appeared in streets and market places, denouncing the sins of the people. Angry parishioners and townsmen often beat them up; their response was to dust themselves off and carry on. Their attitude to authority was one of righteous defiance: no secular power could outweigh the commands of the inner light. When taken before magistrates they addressed them familiarly and refused to doff their hats or swear oaths, so they could not make sworn statements, or promise to be of good behaviour.³ Their stubbornness reduced clergymen and magistrates to speechless fury; their certainty and willingness to suffer won them many supporters, especially among those who had become disoriented amid the welter of religious choice. The earlier gathered churches hated them as much as the parish clergy did, but they went from strength to strength.

The Restoration (1660-89)

The return of Charles II in 1660 made the restoration of the Church of England inevitable: he soon began to appoint new bishops. But, as before 1640, the form of the Church was open to debate. Those who wanted a parish-based puritan church (now known as Presbyterians) hoped for a liturgy purged of the ceremonies of the old Prayer Book and a system of church government in which bishops shared their power with representatives of the parish clergy. Charles seemed inclined to comply with their wishes, but he was thwarted by the House of

Commons, which was determined to restore the old Prayer Book and to insist that all of the parish clergy should give their full 'assent and consent' to everything in it. The net result was to drive out about one fifth of the parish clergy, whose consciences would not allow them to comply. Many hoped that sooner or later the Church would change sufficiently to enable them to re-enter it, but it gradually became apparent that this was not going to happen and they began to form their own separate Presbyterian congregations. Their expulsion, or secession, from the Church added significantly to the number of those outside it, although those who wholly separated from the Church comprised only a small minority of English Protestants; many others attended both their parish churches and Dissenting (or Nonconformist) meetings. A religious census in 1676 suggested that Dissenters comprised under 5% of the population, but compared with the tiny numbers of separatists before 1640, even this seemed to pose a significant challenge to the Church and state, especially as in some towns the figure was much higher - a third in Hereford.⁴ The Corporation Act of 1661 was also designed to uphold the Church, by requiring that all municipal office holders take communion in an Anglican church and renounce the Covenant, an oath imposed by Parliament in 1643. But in many towns these requirements were not enforced and magistrates were often reluctant to harass Dissenters.⁵

None of the separatist denominations really posed a threat to the state, or indeed to the Church, except through the fact of their nonconformity. At the Restoration, Independents, Baptists and Quakers rushed to assure the new king that they were 'peaceable' and harmless. The Quakers, who had seemed the most disruptive in the 1650s, worked hard to re-brand themselves and the Peace Testimony drafted by their leader, George Fox, stressed that they fought only with spiritual, not with 'carnal' weapons.⁶ But the government, and the old Royalists, were not reassured. They blamed the separatists for the king's trial and execution, and for opposing the Restoration. As for the Presbyterians, who had abhorred the regicide and claimed to have promoted the Restoration, Royalists argued that their resistance to the king in the 1640s had opened the way for the overthrow of the monarchy. The Cavaliers found it impossible to believe that the radicals, who had brought Charles I to the block and imposed their own brand of compulsory godliness on the nation, would now recede quietly into the background. Having attempted to weed as many Presbyterians as possible out of the Church in 1662, the Commons brought in measures against Nonconformist meetings, or conventicles. Passed after a small attempted rising, the 1664 Conventicle Act imposed severe penalties on those present at meetings, rising from fines to transportation to the colonies for a third

offence. Many thought the penalties were too severe, and some juries refused to convict, arguing that Quakers (especially) met for religion and not 'on pretence of' religion; the Act lapsed after four years. Renewed Nonconformist activity convinced the Commons that new and different measures were necessary. The 1670 Conventicle Act targeted preachers and those who allowed their houses to be used for meetings; it also allowed informers, who brought evidence against meetings, a share of the fines. Nonconformists flooded to London, hoping that mass defiance would render the Act ineffective, but the authorities held their nerve and the meetings were suppressed.⁷

The king, for his own inscrutable reasons, had given his assent to the Conventicle Act. In 1672 he completely undermined it by a Declaration of Indulgence, which allowed Dissenters to worship in licensed meeting houses. The licences, to preachers and the owners of houses, provide a valuable indication of Dissenting meetings (except those of the Quakers, who believed they did not have to seek anyone's permission to meet).⁸ Congregations which had faltered after the passing of the 1670 Act now resumed meeting, and anxious Presbyterians plucked up courage to compete with the Church of England. The withdrawal of the indulgence in 1673 was followed by sporadic persecution, but many now saw Popery, not Dissent, as the main threat - especially as the conversion of the king's brother, James, raised the prospect of a Popish king. Anglican ministers who tried to promote a Laudian style of worship faced vigorous opposition from both their congregations and town magistrates.⁹ A campaign in 1679-81 to exclude James from the succession revived fears of civil war. The Tories, who defended his right to succeed, believed that the Whigs (or exclusionists) and Dissenters really intended to overthrow the monarchy. The upshot was the most severe persecution of the century. Dissenting meetings were broken up, often by the militia or even regular troops.¹⁰

Many congregations now met secretly, but the Quakers insisted on meeting publicly at stated times, because the light within told them to. If their meeting houses were locked they met in the street outside. Their refusal to compromise on their duty to God meant that hundreds were sent to gaol.¹¹

With the Whigs and Dissenters crushed, James II's accession was peaceful. He hoped that the Church of England men would agree to allow the Catholics (who had fought on the Royalist side in the civil wars) to worship freely and hold public offices. When the Churchmen

showed that they were hostile, James appealed to the Dissenters, offering freedom of worship and access to offices to both Dissenters and Catholics. He issued another Declaration of Indulgence, much more extensive than that of 1672. A minority of Dissenters were eager to embrace this liberty, but the majority, especially the Presbyterians (the most numerous and wealthy) were not. James was thrown back more and more on force and fraud until he was driven out of his kingdom by his nephew, William III, in 1688.

Toleration and After 1689-1715

William III and his wife, James's daughter Mary, had already made public their belief that all Protestants, and even Catholics, should be able to worship freely. The Whigs, while deeply hostile to Catholics, condemned the persecution of Protestant Dissenters. The Tories had defended that persecution, on the grounds that Dissenters were dangerous, but they had countered James's proffer of toleration with offers of their own, from which they now found they had to recede. In Parliament in 1689 they reluctantly rewarded the Dissenters for resisting James's blandishments, but they were determined to keep that reward as small as possible. They killed off proposals to reform the liturgy of the Church to accommodate some of the Presbyterians, but conceded a toleration for Dissenters, which was limited and grudging. The Toleration Act did not repeal any of the Acts against Nonconformity, but stated that they would not be enforced against those who met certain conditions. These included meeting in licensed meeting houses, with the doors open, which implied that otherwise they might use religious meetings as a cover for plotting sedition. Time was to show that the Act was flawed. It required attendance at either an Anglican church or a licensed meeting house, which proved impossible to enforce. It aimed to maintain the Anglican monopoly of public office, leaving in place the requirement that all office holders should take communion in an Anglican church, but many Dissenters proved willing to do this. The Act also failed to lay down effective means to prevent the establishment of Dissenting schools.

With hindsight, the Toleration Act can be seen as ending the persecution of Protestants in England, with the exception of those who denied the Trinity, or refused to swear the oath of allegiance to William and Mary. As a consequence, the amount of material on religion in the State Papers (which are anyway less voluminous after 1685) fell sharply. For a while, the Toleration Act remained deeply contentious, as Tories sought to undermine or even reverse it. Religious strife remained widespread and vicious, even though Dissenters remained only a

small minority in the population: figures generated by the Dissenters themselves in 1718-20 suggested a figure of only 6%.¹² However, there was sporadic violence against Dissenters and their meeting houses, which reached a peak in the summer of 1715 when many Presbyterian meeting houses were destroyed. Despite the relatively small number of Dissenters, the division between Church and Dissent, church and chapel, which originated between 1640 and 1660 and solidified after the Restoration, remained a key feature of English, and later British, life into the twentieth century. The proportion of Nonconformists grew, starting with the emergence of the Methodists in the late 1730s and the influx of Presbyterianism from Scotland and, later, new denominations from America. With added numbers and greater variety came greater vitality, and Nonconformists played a key role in a range of moral crusades, from abolition of the slave trade to temperance, and in the emergence of first the Liberal and then the Labour party.

Citation

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Notes

¹ Of these various bodies, only the records of the committees for plundered ministers are in the State Papers (SP 22).

² See J. S. Morrill, 'The Church in England, 1642-9' in Morrill, ed., *Reactions to the English Civil War, 1642-9* (London, 1982), pp. 89-114.

³ SP 18/130, item no. 46, f. 69, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, [Commonwealth], 1656-7*, pp. 123-4.

⁴ SP 8/14, item no. 88-9, f. 69. The date given in the calendar is wrong. These figures date from 1676 and somehow found their way into William III's personal papers (King William's Chest) before he came to England in 1688. See A. Whiteman, *The Compton Census of 1676* (Oxford, 1986), p. 321 and passim.

⁵ SP 29/368, item no. 184.2, f. 273, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1675-6*, p. 1 and SP 29/383, item no. 74 [1218] f. 140, *ibid*, 1676-7, pp. 221-2.

⁶ SP 29/28, item no. 103, f. 20, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1660-1*, p. 481.

⁷ SP 29/275, f. 204, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1670*, p. 226.

⁸ SP 44/38A, p. 93, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1671-2*, p. 515, licence for John Bunyan.

⁹ SP 29/434, item no. 62 [346] f. 129, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II 1683-4*, p. 88.

¹⁰ SP 44/56, p. 237, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1684-5*, p. 237.

¹¹ SP 29/421, items no. 49 [1645], f. 98, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the reign of Charles II, 1682*, pp. 519-20 and SP 29/436, item no. 4 [790], f. 9, *ibid*, 1683-4, p. 197]

¹² M. Watts, *The Dissenters from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1978), p. 270.