

RELIGION IN THE STATE PAPERS, 1603-1640

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As most researchers in the field of early modern British history are aware, the contents of the state papers, retained in the National Archives at Kew, are to some extent the product of historical accident. Clearly the majority of the documents in SP 14-SP 16 are the working papers of successive secretaries of state and those with whom they associated and corresponded.¹ But, for example, the division of documents between SP 14 and the papers of Sir Robert Cecil, first earl of Salisbury at Hatfield House, is largely random. Among the manuscripts dating from the mid-1610s, there are a number which belonged to Sir Ralph Winwood, but the bulk of his papers are still in the Northamptonshire record office.²

As a result the domestic state paper series is a far more random collection than, for example, the runs of diplomatic correspondence in the various foreign state paper series (e.g. SP 77 (France), SP 94 (Spain) and SP 84 (Holland)) which have at least a semblance of coherence because they are, by and large, composed of the regular reports and related documents which ambassadors dispatched back to London and which dealt, often on a weekly basis, with the issues generated by whatever the British state's foreign policy happened to be at the time when they were written.

This is not to say that we cannot deduce why some of the apparently more curious manuscripts in SP 14-SP 16 are retained in the domestic series. We might, for example, wonder why items of the private correspondence of the second of the Jacobean Roman Catholic archpriests, George Birkhead, should be in SP 14 (see e.g. SP 14/36, item no.8).³ But we know from other sources that Birkhead's secretary, the priest John Copley, defected to the church of England in 1610 and handed over crucial parts of the archpresbyterate's papers to the state and specifically to Archbishop George Abbot.⁴

What this means, however, is that while the documents in the Jacobean domestic state paper series deal with a great range of topics they are not likely to give us a coherent introduction to or overview of those topics as they were understood by contemporaries. This is particularly the case with religion. At the very least one needs continually to contextualise SP 14-SP16 by reference not just to the other state paper collections in the National Archives, and particularly to the Irish and Scottish series (SP 63 and SP 53)⁵ but also to the relevant

political material in other, both British and foreign, archives. This, of course, is what practising historians generally try to do.

Even where we appear to have the materials in SP 14-SP 16 for constructing a theme-based narrative of the period, for example the series of newsletters (by John Chamberlain,⁶ Francis Nethersole and others) with which scholars are familiar, one has to be aware that the events that are being narrated are often heavily slanted and glossed. Chamberlain and the recipient of his letters, Sir Dudley Carleton, were friends of the principal secretary Sir Ralph Winwood. Not surprisingly, Chamberlain's newsgathering reflects the assumptions of the group around Winwood associated with what Simon Adams calls 'political puritanism'.⁷

At the same time, we should remember that we cannot identify, isolate and discuss those manuscripts which are concerned with 'religion' as if they were separate from everything else or at least from other state paper documents. The questions thrown up by divisions in religion were part and parcel of wider contemporary political culture. Some very this-worldly problems were created by trying to exercise government over the national church and by attempting to pursue quite contradictory policies towards different European states. As often as not, the way in which Stuart, as much as Tudor, monarchs defined their enmities towards and their amities with other European states was by reference to the in/compatibility of their respective religions. Neither James I nor Charles I wanted to become the prisoner of pan-European Protestant-cause enthusiasm. But neither could afford to ignore the contemporary association between Protestantism, the national interest and the question of how far the Stuart polity would maintain or alter the not particularly settled Elizabethan settlement of religion.

As a result there is a good deal of material in SP 14-SP 16 which we would regard as dealing with or generated by religion and which we would expect to find deployed in "mainstream" versions of the period. There is extensive information on, for example, the investigations of the Bye and Main plots in James's early years. Here a number of agitators were caught up in a bizarre collection of conspiracies which were part of the unfinished business of the Scottish king's accession in 1603. They were driven in part by dissatisfaction at James's apparent unwillingness to honour his promises to bring in some form of toleration. (This was particularly true of the Catholic plotters William Watson, William Clarke and Anthony Copley.) As we might expect, there are a number of documents relating to the Hampton Court conference in early 1604. We also have here the issues raised by the union with

Scotland (one of which was the question of the different kinds of religion practised in the churches of England and Scotland). Prominent too is the massive ideological controversy raised by the promulgation and then the defence of the oath of allegiance of 1606 as a result of the discovery of the Gunpowder treason (on which, not surprisingly, there is a huge cache of papers). Also under the general heading of religion come many of the papers concerned with, for example, James's support for the Venetian republic during its quarrel with the papacy in 1606-1607, and with the negotiations with the elector palatine Frederick V during the diplomacy for the Anglo-Palatine marriage alliance of 1612-1613. As one might expect, there are documents on the problems caused by the articles of Perth in 1618 (i.e. the requirements for liturgical change and reform which were forced through the General Assembly of the Scottish church at the king's insistence). Subsequently there is a vast amount of material dealing with religion which came out of the extensive diplomacy for the marriage of the heir to the throne, Charles, prince of Wales.

In fact, virtually every major question and *cause célèbre* in contemporary religion is represented here. There are papers on everything from the commissioning of the King James bible to the issue of the declaration (or 'book') of sports (which listed the recreations which might be judged permissible on Sundays and holy days) to the sending of representatives to the synod of Dort in the Netherlands in 1618.

The papers relating to the early Caroline years are heavily populated with numbers dealing with the controversies over the direction in religion being taken by the national church, and in particular whether the church was threatened by 'Arminianism', a style of divinity which many contemporaries reckoned was identical to popery.

The 1630s state papers are, however, rather sparser, since there were, after 1629 and until 1640, no parliaments to serve as a forum for the controversies in religion which were just as present in the 1630s as in the previous decade. SP 16 contains, however, deposits such as some of the records of the southern branch of high commission which are useful, along with other documents, for tracing the rise and implementation of whatever it is that one takes Laudianism to have been.

Thus we have a good deal of material in SP 14-SP 16 which we would expect to see cited in virtually any general narrative of the early seventeenth century. At the same time, what

makes SP 14-SP 16 historiographically significant is that there is so much which allows us to fashion alternative narratives of that same period, narratives which are heavily influenced by contemporary understandings of the political significance of religion. There is, undoubtedly, a lot of documentation about the formal organisation and government of the church as an institution: letters to and from bishops, appointments to benefices and so on. But it is noteworthy that a substantial majority of the papers in SP 14-SP 16 which could be classified as dealing with religion are concerned not just with the topic of popery but, in fact, with actual Catholicism, something which so many textbooks claim or imply was, by the early seventeenth century, no longer politically significant (no more than a 'largely upper-class and faintly exotic sect' as Diarmaid MacCulloch describes it).⁸ So much of the mainstream historiography of the early Jacobean period stresses the apparently seamless (and Protestant) monarchical continuity from Elizabeth Tudor to James Stuart.⁹ But, for example, the years 1603-1605 in SP 14 are chock full of reports from informers and intelligencers about the widespread agitation conducted by a range of interest groups and lobbies, Catholic as well as puritan. Such people thought that the settlement of religion was likely to change substantially as a result of the accession of James VI of Scotland. It was not only the Bye and Main plotters who wanted to hold him to the promises which he had made before his accession.

The full extent and significance of these documents become clear when they are put alongside the similar material in, for example, the Cecil papers at Hatfield House¹⁰ and the printed petitions which circulated widely in the early years of James I. The Catholic approaches to the regime served to stimulate and to underwrite Protestant claims about the dangers of popery. This helps to explain how senior figures in the church such as Matthew Hutton, archbishop of York, felt compelled to intervene and to try to re-orientate royal ecclesiastical policy when it appeared that some puritans were being dealt with at least as, and perhaps more, severely than Catholics.¹¹

The discovery of the gunpowder conspiracy served to impose closure, at least for a time, on these debates about toleration. The revelation of the plot also allowed the regime to clean up some of the apparent inconsistencies of its European peace policy (especially in some of the clauses of the Anglo-Spanish treaty of London of 1604) even while permitting the recruitment of mercenaries for the Dutch.¹² The Dutch kept fighting until the Habsburg

administration in Flanders was forced into a cessation of arms (the truce of Antwerp, signed in 1609).

In turn, the regime's policy towards Europe stimulated a good deal of Catholic protest, even if the vast majority of Catholics would not in any sense have sympathised with the gunpowder plotters. To a great extent, Catholic resistance to the regime took the form of a denial of the king's reading of the relationship between monarchical and papal authority, and between spiritual and temporal power. Many Protestants interpreted this, of course, as a continuation of the gunpowder treason by ideological means. Much of what we know about the Jacobean Catholic community comes from the continued probing by the regime's more zealous Protestant agents of state security (notably Archbishop Abbot and his friends) into the extent that the king's Catholic subjects could be regarded as dangerous radicals and dissenters. At times, particularly after the gunpowder plot, or the assassination of Henry IV of France in May 1610, or the palatine marriage in late 1612/1613, this was quite an easy case to make. At the time of the palatine match, it seemed to some that there was a genuine threat of Catholic revolt. Vigorous efforts were made to disarm Catholics in order to prevent a rebellion.¹³

However, at other times, as numerous documents in the state papers make clear, these Protestant agents of state security had to struggle to sustain this account of a popish threat to the Jacobean polity. This can be quite clearly seen in the dissent over how far the crown's flagship policy of the oath of allegiance 1606 should be enforced.

The allegiance oath was located at the centre of contemporary debates about both the link between religion and politics and the extent and limits of monarchical authority.¹⁴ It allowed both Catholics and Protestants to argue about how far those who were nonconformist could be reckoned to pass a loyalty test to the king if they should take it. The oath became a battleground as contemporaries struggled to interpret what it meant or, rather, to define what the king had meant by it. Some interpreted it as an olive branch to the king's Catholic subjects, allowing them if not to purge their separatism then at least to be able to escape some of the consequences of it. Others thought that the oath should be used to expose the hypocrisy and latent treason in the Catholic community, as bad or even worse among those who partially conformed (i.e. church papists) than among those who were overtly separatist¹⁵

The policy conflict over what to do about Catholic separatism can be picked up also in the serious differences of opinion among crown officials (particularly in the exchequer), and among those who held private commissions for the enforcement of the Elizabethan statutes against Catholic recusancy, over what the regime should do to correct Catholic separatism.¹⁶ Here was a case of a three-cornered debate between Catholic activists, Protestants and royal officials (some of whom might sympathise with either one of the other two). There was a tendency among royal revenue officers to think that it was better to concentrate simply on the financial benefits which could be derived for the crown from Catholic recusants and not to drive them into complete conformity through a harsh and literal enforcement of the recusancy statutes. This meant that the regime's policy towards Catholic recusants was subject to the same considerations as other aspects of the regime's general administration of justice, something which often driven by calculations of profit and loss. The efficiency with which this branch of statute law was regulated by royal officials was liable to be scrutinised by a variety of interested parties and notably by those who claimed that the intentions of the Elizabethan legislators were being vitiated by corrupt officers. These critics of the fiscal system for levying such penalties argued that a more thorough mode of proceeding would not only raise more revenue for the exchequer but would also guarantee that Catholics were compelled into a full conformity. This was something which, it might be assumed, the members of the Elizabethan parliaments of the 1580s and early 1590s had intended.

In the extensive SP 14-SP 16 material on this topic (located also among the papers of the Caroline commissions which negotiated with Catholic recusants for composition of their fines and debts for their separatism) and in related manuscripts (in, for example, BL, Lansdowne MS 153, the papers of the chancellor of the mid-Jacobean exchequer, Sir Julius Caesar), we have a guide to the manner in which the early Stuart state policed the boundaries of separatism and how its approach towards separatism changed over time.¹⁷ When the Jacobean and Caroline state's commitment to the cause of European Protestantism was in question, it was almost inevitable that what had once been regarded as a treasonous popish fifth column might be regarded in a different light.

To a number of observers, including some prominent servants of the mid-Jacobean state (and notably Winwood and his friends) this was highly undesirable. Winwood, Abbot and others

struggled to preserve what they took to have been a former consensus on the relationship of Protestant foreign policy and the need to maintain internal religious and political security. This debate about the relationship between religion and politics can be picked up in these documents not just from the many manuscripts which deal with formal Catholic separatism but also, for example, in the investigations in 1615-1616 into the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, construed by many as symptomatic of a wider-ranging and distinctly popish corruption at court.

The state papers thus give us a kind of counter-cultural perspective on the early Stuart period. Here, the problem of Catholicism (accounts of which are themselves a guide to aspects of contemporary Protestantism and puritanism) tells us a good deal about the range of the policy options with which the regime, from time to time, found itself confronted. This is true in spades for the late 1610s and early 1620s when the collection is positively dominated by the controversy generated by the court's dynastic policy. There was a full-scale domestic political crisis as the king, the prince of Wales and the duke of Buckingham pushed hard to secure an Anglo-Spanish marriage alliance, a project which failed only in the summer of 1623. The extent to which this project served to question many of the assumptions of Protestant contemporaries about the status quo in the English/British churches can be seen in the complete astonishment of Protestant newsletter writers of SP 14 when confronted by the king's apparent willingness to concede a form of more than de facto tolerance to Catholic separatists as part of the price of the marriage diplomacy. When we put the documents here in the context of other collections which are focused on the politics of the 1620s we can see quite how radical the crown's foreign policy had become. Of course, the Spanish match came to nothing. But similar questions were raised by the subsequent diplomacy with the French court, diplomacy which brought Henrietta Maria to England in 1625, and which was supposed to underpin a military alliance against Habsburg encirclement but, obviously, without resort to an explicitly Protestant rationale. The French court could not countenance that it might be thought to be committing France to a Protestant alliance. Hence the determination of the French to demand concessions on religious tolerance from the Stuart court, something which greatly complicated the marriage diplomacy of 1624-1625. The religious glosses on that diplomacy and the foreign policy commitments to which the Stuart and Bourbon courts had bound themselves continued down to 1629 at which point Charles withdrew from trying to assist the French king's Huguenot rebels.¹⁸

Contemporaries frequently associated the Catholic issue (popery) with what they took to be inappropriate, in fact positively harmful, deviations from Protestant orthodoxy in the national church. We can follow, in SP 14-SP 16 (from the later Jacobean period onwards, and then into the reign of Charles) some of the higher profile political quarrels caused by what some, both Protestants and Catholics, and latterly some historians, have termed the rise of Arminianism. A classic case in the state papers is the record of John Howson's 'trial' before the king in 1615¹⁹ in which George Abbot accused Howson of tending towards popery.²⁰ Churchmen such as Abbot wanted not just to guarantee ideological unity with European Protestants but also to build bridges towards other European Christians who might be persuaded to reject papal authority. A classic case in SP 14 is that of Marc'Antonio de Dominis, archbishop of Split. His journey to England and his sojourn in the English church were sponsored by Abbot. De Dominis was supposed to demonstrate that (Catholic) scepticism towards papal jurisdiction and political authority, expressed in language not dissimilar to the kind of rhetoric which James had deployed when he espoused the cause of the Venetian republic in its quarrel with the papacy in 1606-1607, could in fact serve as a prelude to a wholesale rejection of popery. De Dominis, however, had his own distinctive theological agenda. By the early 1620s he had openly rejected central aspects of what some of his new patrons took to be Protestant orthodoxy. By early 1622 he allowed himself to be recruited for the king's foreign policy agenda when James decided to push hard for the successful conclusion of an Anglo-Spanish dynastic marriage treaty.

Under James, the opportunities for anti-Calvinists (as they are sometimes called) to express their opinions were, for the most part, limited. But the 'new counsels' in state as well as church adopted by Charles I, faced with the intransigence of his early parliaments and the problems created by his aggressive foreign policy in the later 1620s, allowed for the rejection of, as some scholars refer to it, a Calvinist consensus. The political significance of this became clear with the royal patronage extended to clerics such as Richard Montagu, John Cosin, Robert Sibthorpe and Roger Mainwaring. Cosin's quarrel with Peter Smart over the innovations in Durham Cathedral can be followed in SP 16. After 1628 there is a good deal of material, particularly in the papers associated with and belonging to William Laud, of identification and penalisation of what the crown appeared to identify as puritanism.

In these circumstances, Catholic agitators represented themselves to the regime as having always told the truth about puritanism. Some of them, notably the officials of the recently nominated bishop of Chalcedon, Richard Smith, now tried to square the loyalism circle. They argued that their brand of Catholicism was an expression of Christianity which was more compatible with monarchical authority (even when the monarch was formally of another confession) than either the obstreperous anti-popery of some parliamentarians or, on the other hand, the political radicalism of some other Catholics. Hence the significance of the large number of papers in SP 16 derived from the Catholic ‘approbation controversy’ of c. 1627-1631. (This was a re-run, in some respects, of the archpriest dispute of the late Elizabethan period.) Here, Bishop Smith and his officials tried to justify his jurisdictional claims over the English Catholic community in spite of the requirements of the royal supremacy. Smith’s enemies argued that his exercise of his authority was indeed an offence against the royal supremacy over the national church.²¹

Thus the domestic state papers series is not, as far as religion is concerned, composed of a consistent run of position papers and memoranda about how the early Stuart regimes thought the national church should be run. It is, however, a valuable record of some of the religious issues thrown up by the events with which the early Stuart state was forced to deal. It is a record also of the counterfactuals which from time to time presented themselves to the Jacobean and Caroline regimes as alternative platforms on which to construct an appropriate mode of government of the national church.

Citation

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Notes

¹ See, e.g., Charles I’s order to Dorchester on 24 January 1631 to secure the papers of the former secretary Lord Conway, The National Archives, SP 16/183, item no. 18.

² They are calendared in *Report on the Manuscripts of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry* (Historical Manuscripts Commission, 3 vols, London, 1926), I, pp. i-ii. Many of Winwood’s papers were printed in E. Sawyer (ed.), *Winwood Memorials* (3 vols, London, 1745).

³ The papacy appointed archpriests in and after 1598 to exercise authority over the Catholic secular clergy based in England.

⁴ M. Questier, ed., *Newsletters from the Archpresbyterate of George Birkhead, 1609-1614* (Camden Society, fifth series, 12, London, 1998), pp. 38, 137, 140, 150, 157.

⁵ All through SP 14-SP 16 we have references to what is going on in Ireland and Scotland. James VI had started to roll back some aspects of presbyterianism in the 1590s and, once he had taken the English crown, he shifted his position on the relationship between the church of England and the church of Scotland. But the unreformed church in Ireland was a constant reminder that the compromises adopted in England and Scotland might not necessarily remain as they were.

⁶ See N. E. McClure, ed., *The Letters of John Chamberlain* (2 vols, Philadelphia, 1939).

⁷ S. Adams, 'The Protestant Cause: Religious Alliance with the West European Calvinist Communities as a Political Issue in England, 1585-1630' (D.Phil., Oxford, 1973).

⁸ D. MacCulloch, *Reformation* (London, 2007), p. 393.

⁹ For an excellent discussion of this issue, see J. Watkins, "'Out of her Ashes May a Second Phoenix Rise": James I and the Legacy of Elizabethan Anti-Catholicism', in A. Marotti, ed., *Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in Early Modern English Texts* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 116-36.

¹⁰ Publisher's note: The calendars to the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House are included in *State Papers Online*.

¹¹ SP 14/10, item no. 64.

¹² P. Croft, 'Serving the Archduke: Robert Cecil's Management of the Parliamentary Session of 1606', *Historical Research*, 64 (1991), pp. 289-304.

¹³ Questier, *Newsletters* (see note 4 above), p. 211.

¹⁴ M. Questier, 'Loyalty, Religion and State Power in Early Modern England: English Romanism and the Jacobean Oath of Allegiance', *Historical Journal* 40 (1997), pp. 311-27; *idem*, 'Catholic Loyalism in Early Stuart England', *English Historical Review* 123 (2008), pp. 1132-65.

¹⁵ SP 14/56, item no. 60.

¹⁶ The state papers, especially in the mid- and later Jacobean period, are littered with documents which deal with this aspect of royal revenue. (Document: SP 14/80, item no. 67. See also item nos 68, 69, and 70).

¹⁷ See e.g. M. Questier, "Sir Henry Spiller, Recusancy and the Efficiency of the Jacobean Exchequer", *Historical Research* 66 (1993), pp. 251-66.

¹⁸ See e.g. T. Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution* (Cambridge, 1989); M. Questier, ed., *Stuart Dynastic Policy and Religious Politics, 1621-1625* (Camden Society, 5th series, 34, 2009).

¹⁹ SP 14/80, item no.113.

²⁰ See N. Cranfield and K. Fincham, eds, 'John Howson's answers to Archbishop Abbot's accusations at his "trial" before James I at Greenwich, 10 June 1615', *Camden Miscellany* 29 (Camden Society, 4th series, 1987), pp. 320-41. A number of scholars have argued that there is a progression from the conformist thought of John Whitgift and Richard Bancroft, through the theorising of Richard Hooker, all the way to the positions adopted by Arminian divines, P. Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans?* (1987).

²¹ For the approbation controversy, see M. Questier, *Catholicism and Community* (Cambridge, 2006), ch. 13.