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Decompartmentalizing Religion

In a manner fitting the 330th anniversary of Oliver Cromwell's inauguration as protector, John Morrill ended his 1983 lecture to the Royal Historical Society with a "firework," famously stating "the English Civil War was not the first European Revolution: it was the last of the wars of religion."[1] Admittedly intended as a throwaway line following a much more nuanced argument, his proclamation has profoundly influenced thirty years of scholarship. *England's Wars of Religion, Revisited* represents a reflection on the historiographical significance of Morrill's hypothesis–as Glenn Burgess demonstrates in chapter 1–and the continuing challenge it poses to historians. While the fourteen chapters defy being clustered into precise, coherent subsections, some key themes run throughout.

A trio of papers demonstrate that religious argumentation was not the sole preserve of "puritans." Ronald Asch argues that "conformist" theologians appropriated a theory of *religion royale*, developed in the upheavals of late sixteenth-century France, to assert kingship's sacredness and to root it in his anointing, thus affirming the church's essential role. According to Asch, James I embraced this position hoping to form an alliance against "theocratic claims made by both Rome and Geneva" (p. 39). While the argument meant little to puritan detractors, it may recast the meaning of the adage "no bishops, no king." Burgess explains how shared desire to defend royal supremacy and episcopacy motivated conformists, while highlighting efforts to balance these two ideals could lead to division. Here Burgess demonstrates both the dynamic nature of religious thought among conformists and their ideological diversity. Charles Prior takes a slightly different approach investigating puritan perceptions of episcopal policy. Rather than interpreting *England's Complaint* (1640) as evidence of puritan radicalization, he demonstrates that the tract actually called for the preservation of traditional spheres and denounced the *Canons and Constitutions Ecclesiastical* (1640) as radically innovative, accusing the bishops of acting like a "foreign power in the Realm" seeking to exclude parliament from the governance of the church and to usurp the king's headship (pp. 120–121). Together these chapters demonstrate the royalist appropriation of religious argumentation.

A second theme is the conceptual relationship between self-defense, natural rights, and religious thought. Sarah Mortimer discusses contested claims to the rights of self-defense in the early 1640s, explaining that many parliamentarians argued that religion and politics could go hand in hand because natural rights were founded on natural law and God had established natural law. In contrast, Royalists, like Henry Hammond, asserted that the gospel's demand for submission rendered Christian claims to natural rights moot and prohibited resistance to a magistrate. According to Mortimer, these profoundly divergent approaches reduced the possibility of a philosophical resolution. Rachel Foxley analyzes the place of religion in Cromwell's theory of resistance, concluding it to be expressed primarily in two ways: a fundamental correlation between civil and religious liberties, because civil liberties "fence the people of God in their interest" (p. 219); and a providentialist expectation that God would use England in working out divine plans for the world. Foxley thus concludes that "taking the religious motivations of Cromwell and his colleagues seriously must lead us back to a fuller sense of their politics,

rather than diverting us from it." However, she seems to cloud what this might entail by asserting that, despite being influenced by the "true 'wars of religion'," England's own conflicts were "necessarily wars of politics as well as religion" and "not merely confessional" (p. 230). This is problematic in relation to Morrill's thesis, as he denies that any historian can or would reduce the motives behind the Thirty Years' War to mere religious, let alone confessional, grounds. As such, Morrill never intended to do so in relation to England. Foxley's late recasting of religious (or confessional) stimuli within the English context renders her earlier appraisal of religion's influence on Cromwell too narrow. In actual fact, the religious and political motives can hardly be dissected, for Cromwell perceived the imperative at the core of parliament's duty to be the maintenance of an orderly state providing liberty for God's providential guiding of the nation. Although the domination of conscience under Charles I and William Laud inhibited this, so too did antinomian and Fifth Monarchists' extremes. Cromwell understood liberty (civil and religious) to mean the freedom to follow God's providence, not the freedom of will in the modern sense.

Both Blair Worden and John Coffey also discuss liberty, offering highly innovative hypotheses. For Worden, it was Cromwell, through his speeches and correspondence, who intricately linked civil and religious liberties together so effectively that by the beginning of the 1650s it had become widely adopted within the public discourse, eventually becoming a "mantra." Having given birth to this fundamental link however, its general adoption actually brought about the demise of Cromwell's own dream of a sustainable godly commonwealth, as interpretations of what these liberties entailed could not be constrained. Here Worden offers an original appraisal of Interregnum Republicanism's inherent vulnerability. Coffey also charts new waters in proffering a theoretical framework to unify the oft-dismembered puritan "zeal for true religion and passion for liberation" by demonstrating that many who sided with parliament conceived their experience as one of deliverance from oppression, modeled on the biblical motif of the Exodus. Independents, Diggers, Quakers, and Fifth Monarchists drew the comparison and sermons preached before parliament expounded on Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The significance of Coffey's paradigm is that it offers a model capable of reconciling Morrill's emphasis on religion and Quentin Skinner's on liberation from servitude, and can also be applied to the other "British revolutions" of 1641, 1688, and 1776. Together, the essays of Coffey, Foxley, Mortimer, and Worden make a solid contribution to enhance the ways that religious ideas shaped notions of liberty and liberation.

The power of fear is a third theme. Robert von Friedeburg discusses continental responses to Catholic threats during the Thirty Years' War and their possible influence on English minds, but concludes that a complicated domestic "political sociology of [local] mobilization played a more fundamental role" (p. 73). While no doubt true, it is surprising that his assessment did not take into account reports of alleged atrocities perpetrated by Catholics in Ireland during the 1641 Rising that bore striking resemblances to those attributed to their coreligionists on the continent. Jeffrey Collins grants much greater significance to anti-Catholic sentiments and argues for a lasting legacy beyond the Interregnum. He disputes the claims of John Locke and others–all too frequently accepted by historians–that the possibility of tolerating Catholics in Restoration England depended wholly on the distinction between political Romanism and religious Catholicism. Instead, he demonstrates an incongruity in the state's response to Catholic and Protestant appeals to "contractual, natural rights logic" in determining political allegiances, which in the case of Catholics were equated as "functionally equivalent to foreign allegiance" (pp. 305–306). It is a compelling conclusion worth extending both chronologically and geographically. Michael Braddick explores how fears of Catholics and sectarians mobilized popular resistance. Unlike in Scotland, where the National Covenant offered a unifying model for action, "English partisans grappled with the ambiguous legacy of the English Reformation" (p. 143). This led to a situation characterized not by clear distinctions between popular and elite politics, local and national concerns, or even between clear religious camps, but rather "a developing emphasis on the relationship between politicians and their publics" (p. 144). Here Braddick suggests, like von Friedeburg, that studying mobilization produces a more nuanced picture than traditional methodological approaches.

A final theme is the construction of individual worldviews. Alan Cromartie's reexamination of Laud determines that his theology and memorialist view of the Eucharist were in line with the positions of John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli, leading him to question the traditional Puritan–Arminian polarity and to emphasize the complexity of the inner world of the mind. Similarly, J. Sears McGee recasts Simon D'Ewes, a parliamentarian generally characterized as more concerned with constitutional and legal matters than overtly religious concerns,

as a historian astutely aware of contemporary European events who interpreted them "theopolitically" (p. 159). Here McGee shines light on an important reality that for D'Ewes, as well as the vast majority of his fellow English men and women, their world as they understood it did not depend on the actions of men. Instead they interpreted past, present, and future events as dependent on the will of God, and, therefore, their theologies profoundly shaped how they interpreted events.

Morrill's own chapter offers an excellent response to the "legacy" attributed to his hypothesis. While offering some high praise for his fellow contributors, he insists that a number of blind spots persist in the wider historiography. One is a general tendency to treat Catholicism and fears about Catholicism as mere "fuzzy background" noise, rather than engage with the difficulties continental confessional models pose for determining the role Catholicism played within a Protestant civil war or take stock of the ways visceral fears of "popery" shaped events. Another persistent blind spot is the use of biblical citations and allusions by seventeenth-century authors. Morrill admits that scholars all-too-often have a tin ear in discerning the sources writers drew upon, frequently due to their own biases, but he strongly believes that attention to the particular scriptural passages and exegetical interpretations employed is crucial for garnering the full meaning of texts. This is all the more important as he remains convinced that those "who became militant on both sides … were those for whom religious (theopolitical) language was primary and consistent" (p. 318). Yet sifting through texts for scriptural references alone is an insufficient approach and scholars must be aware that "multiple languages"–legal, theological, philosophical, and classical–could be employed in a single text, something that became all-the-more prominent with the rise of professional pens for hire. Men like Marchamont Nedham and Henry Parker produced texts that crossed boundaries and employed languages from multiple spheres, but so too did nonprofessionals. For this reason, Morrill urges historians to acknowledge the multiplicity of discourses and specialized languages utilized within texts and to move beyond overly simplified distinctions between lay and clerical authorship.

Characterizing the "unintended consequences" resulting from his proclamation, Morrill astutely demonstrates the cul-de-sacs overly narrow interpretations of religion's significance can lead historians down, as well as the lingering challenges his assertion still poses for historians thirty years down the road (p. 307). In conclusion, Morrill takes the opportunity to spur another debate by reminding his readers that these were not simply England's wars of religion, but the whole of Britain and Ireland too. This is not a new argument from Morrill, but is one that too few historians have yet chosen to take on board.

Note

[1]. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 34 (1984): 155–178.

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