

# History and Denominational History

THE principal headache of the historian—at least of the 16th and 17th century historian—is not too few documents but too many predecessors. Much of his work consists in sifting and criticising the writings of previous scholars, whose conclusions have often ceased to carry conviction with professional historians by the time they have become commonplace in the school text-books. Now there is, of course, an element of academic show-off here: demonstrating the folly of your elders and betters is always a good way to earn a reputation, even if a transient one. But there is more to it than that. Each generation naturally and necessarily questions the assumptions of its predecessors, assumptions which spring from and change with the society in which historians, like everyone else, live. Fresh questions are asked about the present, and things which one generation took for granted are called in question by its successor. It is difficult, in this healthy process, to avoid the appearance of ingratitude towards the great historians of the past. But we can see further, if we do see further, only because we pygmies are standing on the shoulders of giants. Anything I say in this article must be premised by this apology.

With that premise, many historians today would I think agree that, especially in the sphere of the religious history of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, there is some criticising to be done. Considerable confusion was caused by historians, great historians in some cases, writing the history of their own sect, looking for its origins, and so tending to draw dividing lines more sharply than contemporaries would have done. Having assumed that their predecessors held (or ought to have held) the same views as they did, these historians rebuked the men of the 16th and 17th centuries for failing to live up to 19th century standards.

To the 19th century historian protestants were protestants and catholics were catholics; the criteria for distinguishing between them seemed perfectly clear, even if there was some blurring towards the centre. But when we are considering English history between, say, 1530 and 1560, it is much less certain how many English men and women thought of themselves as either "protestants" or "catholics". If they asked such questions at all, most would probably think of themselves as members of a Church of England whose doctrine and discipline were at times subject to changes from on top, the full import of which would not be obvious in the localities. This was true of clergymen as well as of the laity: it is much the most satisfactory explanation of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the clergy who survived from 1545 to 1560 held on to their livings in a church which (in our modern terminology) was successively Anglo-Catholic, protestant, radical pro-

testant, Roman catholic, and then again protestant—if that is the right word for the Elizabethan settlement! They were not chameleons, nor were most of them any less high-principled than we are: the lines of division were not so clear-cut to most contemporaries as they seem to the historian looking through his end of the telescope. There were of course men who did feel that profound issues of principle were at stake, like the Marian martyrs and some of those who condemned them to the flames. But the vast majority of the martyrs were laymen, not clerics; it is arguable that most of them were backward-looking Lollards rather than forward-looking protestants. Many of them would certainly have won Elizabeth's disapproval.

The same consideration applies equally forcibly to the next period of rapid development and transformation, the years between 1640 and 1660. Sectarian lines of division begin to be clearly drawn only when the possibility and the necessity of the co-existence of different religious bodies has been accepted: it certainly had not been accepted by more than a tiny minority of Englishmen before 1640. Most of the small groups of émigrés in Holland and New England, even those who had most self-consciously separated from what they regarded as the corruptions of the Church of England, still hoped for the total reformation of the state church. Robert Browne's slogan, "reformation without tarrying for any", implied that men separated in order to reunite. It is easy for historians looking backwards to think they see sharper lines of division than consciously existed at the time. Before 1640, as Professor Haller warily pointed out, a congregation was much more likely to be swayed by the personality—often the developing personality—of its preacher than by attachment to any theological "-ism".<sup>1</sup> We should see diversity in a united opposition to Laudian control of the state church rather than an alliance of consciously differing religious communities.

When after 1640 the sectaries emerged from their underground existence in England, or returned from exile, their new freedom kept the situation fluid. Congregations expanded rapidly, and account had to be taken of the views of the newcomers; there were many "sermon-tasters", or "seekers", who went from congregation to congregation, some genuinely questing for truth, others out of curiosity or a desire to make mischief. It was long indeed before clear-cut lines of sectarian division were imposed on this flux. Bunyan's Bedford congregation, looking back to the early 1650s, said that its members "neither were nor yet desired to be embodied into fellowship according to the order of the Gospel; only they had in some measure separated themselves from the prelatical superstition, and had agreed to search after the nonconformity-men, such

<sup>1</sup> W. Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (1938), pp. 179-80.

as in those days did bear the name of Puritans".<sup>1</sup> It was such non-sectarian congregations that George Fox found waiting for him all over the North of England when he rode thither in 1651-2.

But we can push it further back than that. Presbyterianism, from Queen Elizabeth's time to 1640, and indeed to 1662, was never willingly sectarian. Its supporters hoped for the transformation of the Church of England into a Presbyterian church. They were perfectly straightforward in their appeals to Queen or King and Parliament against the bishops. They had no more wish to *abolish* the Church of England than Henry VIII or Cranmer; like them, the Presbyterians wished to change its government in a further (and final) instalment of national reform. It is therefore absurd, as well as anachronistic, to differentiate before 1640 between "Puritans" and "Anglicans". The "Puritans" were just as good Anglicans as the "episcopalians" or "Laudians" or whatever we choose to call them. The word "Anglican" is appropriate as a sectarian label only after 1662.

Henry Burton, for instance, whom historians call an Independent, thought it was the Laudian bishops who were disrupting the unity of the national church. "They have laboured to bring in a change in doctrine; in discipline; in the civil government; in the prayer-books set forth by public authority; in the rule of faith, and in the customs." Many who were to remain within the church agreed with him in regarding Laudianism as a brief aberration. Francis Cheynell, looking back in 1643, said "the Archbishop was rather schismatical in imposing such burdens upon tender communicants than the people in separating from external communion".<sup>2</sup> For long after 1640 such men hoped for a reformed Church of England which would be acceptable to many of those who had felt forced to separate. Before 1662, at earliest, most of those whom we call Presbyterians and Independents, and some of those whom we call Baptists, still believed in a national church, and their ministers were prepared to accept its livings and its tithes. A circular signed by Independents among other divines of the Westminster Assembly, for instance, urged "all ministers and people . . . to forbear, for a convenient time, the joining of themselves into church societies of any kind whatsoever, until they see whether the right rule will not be commended to them in this orderly way". (The Five Dissenting Brethren were rebuked by the 19th century historian of congregationalism as having "much to learn in relation to religious

<sup>1</sup> Ed. G. B. Harrison, *The Church Book of Bunyan Meeting, 1650-1821* (1928), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> H. Burton's sermon, *God and the King*, quoted by J. Waddington, *Congregational History, 1567-1700* (1874), p. 338; Francis Cheynell, *The Rise, Growth and Danger of Socinianisme* (1643), p. 65.

freedom".<sup>1</sup> The necessity of a state church was still being expounded in the Independent Savoy Declaration of 1658; Yarmouth Independents in 1659 defended tithes against Quaker criticisms, and professed their "utter dislike and abhorrence of a universal toleration, as being contrary to the mind of God in His word". ("It is very evident", commented another 19th century historian, "that though they had learned much, they were not already perfect; . . . it was necessary that they should again go into the school of affliction."<sup>2</sup>)

The Cromwellian state church of the 1650s included men whom we should today, no doubt, label "Anglican", "Presbyterian", "Congregationalist" and "Baptist". But it also included many men, and indeed many leaders, whom it is difficult to pigeon-hole in this way at all. The disagreements among historians as to the exact sectarian classification of an individual or a congregation is the best evidence that what they are trying to do is unsatisfactory because anachronistic. Richard Baxter rejected in advance the label "Presbyterian" which historians continue to put upon him during this period. As late as 1672 John Bunyan registered himself and his congregation as Congregationalist; in the '50s many congregations could be described equally well as Congregationalist or Baptist. They practised intercommunion. Who knows what label to attach to Oliver Cromwell, John Milton, Major-General Fleetwood, John Ireton, Colonel John Hutchinson and Lucy his wife? If we cannot classify such well-documented figures as these, it is absurd to try to be more precise about men who have left fewer traces.

In time those sects whose community of believers was united by covenant or adult baptism lost hope of recapturing the state church from which they had seceded; they accepted the permanent status of sectaries. The unique freedom of the '40s and '50s hastened this process by enabling far more national organisation on a sectarian basis than had ever before been possible. The Baptists for instance organised themselves sufficiently to have evolved a Confession by 1644. But in the '50s they were still quarrelling among themselves about the lawfulness of taking tithes—which means about the lawfulness of a state church;<sup>3</sup> and some few Baptists actually held livings in, and acted as Triers for, the Cromwellian church. The Quakers I think were the first sect organised on a national scale which rejected any possibility of compromise with the state church. They consistently denounced its "hireling priests" and its "steeple-houses". But the Quakers themselves

<sup>1</sup> Waddington, *op. cit.*, pp. 426, 430.

<sup>2</sup> J. Browne, *History of Congregationalism . . . in Norfolk and Suffolk* (1877), pp. 167, 225-6.

<sup>3</sup> B. R. White, "The Organisation of the Particular Baptists, 1644-1660", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XVII, pp. 211, 223-4.

embraced many trends of thought, bellicose as well as pacifist, political as well as quietist, until George Fox united them into a sect after 1660.

Quaker influence may have helped to harden Baptist attitudes. By the end of the '50s Quakers, General and Particular Baptists were nationally organised as sects. After 1662 they were joined, extremely reluctantly, by Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The latter were deliberately excluded from the restored episcopalian church, which rejected the idea, put forward by Baxter and others, of returning to something like the pre-Laudian state church in which there had been many mansions. In 1672 John Owen spoke of those "who separate, or rather are driven from, the present public worship". Four years later he claimed that such men "do sacredly adhere unto . . . the doctrine of the Church of England . . . as it is contained in the Articles of Religion, the Books of Homilies, and declared in the authenticated writings of all the learned prelates and others for 60 years after the Reformation".<sup>1</sup> Dissenters, he was claiming, were the true Church of England.

Occasional conformity, the habit of going to the services of the Church of England once a year or so, was often practised in the later 17th and 18th centuries as a means by which nonconformists could qualify themselves for state office. For this reason it has been denounced as a hypocritical practice, and so no doubt it often became in the 18th century. But occasional conformity sprang from the logic of John Owen's position, and indeed has a very respectable intellectual ancestry.

Before 1640 only a very small minority were separatists on fixed principle, and they almost certainly hoped that their separation would lead to reunion—either as a consequence of the abolition of bishops, or of the rule of the saints or of the personal appearance of Jesus. Men like Henry Jacob and the New England Independents wished to retain some communion with the national church. Even Brown in 1588 had envisaged something not unlike the Cromwellian state church when he said: "The civil magistrates have their right in all causes to judge and set order, and it is intolerable presumption for particular persons to scan of every magistrate's gifts or authority, or to deny them the power of judging ecclesiastical causes . . . If again it be said that while men might take and refuse their ministers as they list, all factions and heresies might grow, I answer that the civil magistrate must restrain that licentiousness. But the way to restrain it is prescribed of God . . . None be suffered to have their voice or right in choosing church offices and officers but only such as are tried to be sufficiently grounded and tried to be able to give a reason of their faith and religion. And that

<sup>1</sup> J. Owen, *Discourse on Christian Love and Peace* (1672), in *Works* (ed. W. H. Goold, 1965), XV, p. 102; *The Nature and Causes of Apostasy* (1676), *Works*, VII, p. 74; cf. p. 133, XV, pp. 184-5, 345-58.

the civil magistrates may, if they will, be both present and directors of the choice, yet permitting any man to make just exceptions against them which are to be chosen."<sup>1</sup>

Congregationalists and some Baptists participated in Cromwell's state church, side by side with Episcopalians and Presbyterians, and many whose views were indeterminate by our standards. This confusion (as it seems to us) immensely strengthened the hand of the bishops after 1660. Take John Tombes, for instance. Doctrinally he was a Baptist. But he is not usually claimed by Baptist historians because he held a living from 1630 to 1662, and in his licence under the Indulgence of 1672 he described himself as a Presbyterian. On his death-bed he declared that he dared not separate from communion with the Church of England "any farther than by going out of church whilst that office [Baptism] was performed, and returning in again when it was ended".<sup>2</sup> Thomas Grantham, who is accepted as a Baptist by Baptist historians, was buried in St. Stephen's Church, Norwich, by the vicar of that church, who was later himself buried in the same grave.<sup>3</sup>

Patriotism came into it too. The breach with Rome had been a national act, or at least was so represented after it had taken place. Under Elizabeth and again in the 17th century the Puritans were the spearhead of English patriotism against Spain and the Pope. Under Laud and under Oliver Cromwell patriotism and prelacy seemed to be diametrically opposed. But in the 1670s and '80s the Church of England revealed itself as firmly anti-Catholic, anti-French and therefore patriotic. The trial of the Seven Bishops probably did more to make occasional conformists than the mere desire for office. So though the practice of occasional conformity may ultimately have degenerated into a device by which dissenters dishonestly qualified themselves for government office, it was in origin the outward sign among those forced into separation of the continuing hope that a church uniting all protestant Englishmen might still somehow be realisable. Oliver Cromwell's state church deserves to receive more attention from those interested in protestant reunion: so too does the maligned practice of occasional conformity.

Above all, we need continual vigilance to preserve a historical attitude towards the evolution of the bodies of worshippers who after 1662 became dissenters. We must neither attribute to them views which were only evolved later, nor criticise them too severely

<sup>1</sup> Robert Browne, *An Aunswere to Mr. Floweres letter*, in *The Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne* (ed. A. Peel and L. H. Carlson, 1953), pp. 521-2.

<sup>2</sup> A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (1947), pp. 69-70.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

for not knowing what their successors were going to think. "We are the men of the present age!" cried the Leveller Richard Overton; he and his contemporaries must be studied as they were, warts and all, in relation to the society in which they lived: just as the assumptions and beliefs of our generation will one day be the subject of (one hopes) charitably relativistic historical enquiry.

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*An Existentialist Theology.* John Macquarrie. London. S.C.M. 1965. Pp. 252. 18s.

When this book was first published in 1955, it was much praised. Ten years have elapsed, but although the critics who praised it have had ample time for reflection, it is unlikely that they would wish to withdraw anything they said in its favour. It remains the best treatment of its subject in English, and it will be doubly welcome now that it appears in a cheap paper-back edition.

Professor Macquarrie describes with remarkable lucidity the influence of existential philosophy upon contemporary theological thought, chiefly with reference to the existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger and to the theology of Rudolph Bultmann. In the introduction he claims that there is an affinity between the method and content of existentialism and Biblical ways of thinking. In the first part of the book he compares Heidegger's conception of inauthentic existence with Bultmann's exposition of the New Testament teaching on man without faith, and in the second part he is concerned with Heidegger's conception of authentic existence in relation to Bultmann's exposition of the Christian life as a new understanding of the self.

The book will be of great help to readers who find Heidegger's *Being and Time* very difficult to understand, and to readers who, like Professor Macquarrie himself, wish to protest against Bultmann's excessive devaluation of the objective-historical origins of Christian faith. Readers of the BAPTIST QUARTERLY may perhaps be inclined to suppose that the book deals with matters remote from their special interest. Modern philosophers and theologians, however, are much given to reflection upon the problems of history, and readers of Baptist history and those who write it, may derive profit from such reflection if they allow themselves to be asked what they take history to be. One of the most interesting chapters in this book is entitled, "Existence as Historical".

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