

# The English Separatist Tradition

This fine book\* by Dr. White is welcome for more than one reason. The first is that it fills a gap and adds significantly to our knowledge and understanding of our history.

Fifty years ago we were all brought up to know and admire Robert Browne and the Elizabethan martyrs, Barrow, Greenwood and Penry: as children through Mackennal's *Story of the English Separatists*, which, though published in 1893, with its appealing illustrations, was still captivating; and as we grew older, through the thrilling opening of Silvester Horne's *Popular History of the Free Churches* (1903). From 1915 onwards Albert Peel's devotion to the Separatists' churchmanship and cause was made plain in a stream of books, pamphlets and articles; but he never felt it right to give to church history the single-minded devotion which his teacher, Sir Charles Firth, had hoped for, and at his premature death in 1949 the volume for which his manifold studies were intended as groundwork was not even begun. He had, however, started work on the scholarly re-publication of the Separatists' own writings in a series which he persuaded the Sir Halley Stewart Trust to underwrite. This promise the Trust has honoured, and during the last twenty years the works of Browne, Barrow and Greenwood have appeared successively, under the editorship of Professor L. E. Carlson.

In 1950, at the time of the supposed fourth centenary of Robert Browne's birth, a *Times* leader (written by Dr. Payne) said that Browne's tradition "was probably never more widespread and powerful than it is today." The Congregationalists' interest in Browne and Separatism, nevertheless, has steadily waned, both in this country and in America. Congregational churchmanship has moved fast in a Presbyterian direction; and Congregational historians have either—notwithstanding a weighty demurrer from Dr. Payne—disowned their fathers' Separatist ancestry or else have assumed it and, beginning with John Robinson and the Pilgrim Fathers, have concentrated attention on the church's efflorescence in the years

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\**The English Separatist Tradition: from the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers*. By B. R. White. London: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pp. xiv + 179. £2.75.

1640-1660. Now at last in this book on *The English Separatist Tradition*, based on a systematic examination of the (still incomplete) "Elizabethan Nonconformist Texts" which Peel inaugurated, a Baptist historian has fulfilled part at least, and a vital part, of what Peel planned. For a reader to whom Peel used to talk of his efforts and hopes the appearance of this book would therefore be heart-warming, stirring a *Laus Deo!*, even if it were not the fine piece of independent, reliable scholarship which in fact it is.

As his title suggests, Dr. White is concerned throughout with the *tradition*. One of his objects, which he achieves, is to establish that there *was* a tradition. Already in the reign of Mary Tudor groups of earnest Protestants were meeting in Sussex, Suffolk and Essex, particularly round Colchester, as well as in London; and in London the congregation was sufficiently organized to have two deacons and a succession of ministers, and practised both discipline and the financial relief of members in need or in prison. These groups, especially the London congregation, were "claimed . . . as their forerunners" (p. 19) by the Elizabethan Separatists. For when Elizabeth came to the throne, and Protestantism was restored, it did not go very far. "The cry for unity and loyalty was all very well, but what if unity could only be preserved at the cost of truth's betrayal?" (p. 22). Dr. White presents the evidence for a number of Elizabethan Separatist congregations in London, pointing particularly to one meeting at Plumbers' Hall in 1567 and to another a little later, the names of whose minister and deacon are known (the deacon died in prison); and he shows how these congregations regarded themselves as "the heirs of an earlier witness" (p. 32). At the same time he makes the important point that the Separatists' concern for the restoration of discipline in the Church was largely shared by "their less radical brethren who remained . . . within . . . the Church of England," so that it was "comparatively easy to move" from a Puritan position out into Separatism (pp. 32-33).

The Separatist "appeal to the authority of the Bible over against that of the Church" (p. 15), interpreted in terms of "the present rule of the Risen Christ in the midst of his people by means of the power and practice of scriptural discipline" (p. 52) Robert Browne carried forward; but "his most significant contribution was to set" this "inherited pattern within the framework of a covenant relationship" (p. 53). God's covenant of grace with man demands the response of a covenant by men with God and with one another. "Only in the *covenanted* community does Christ really rule, and then by means of his Spirit and his word" (p. 63). Not the minister, Browne said, but the keeping of the covenant was "the essence . . . of the outward Church" (p. 63).<sup>1</sup>

This was revolutionary teaching—as it still is—which personally Browne recanted—a meteor come to earth—for a living in the Church

of England. But he had disciples in London, and his principles were put into practice in the congregation to which Barrow and Greenwood belonged, a congregation in which Dr. White notes, among other characteristics of Separatism, the use of extempore prayer and the limiting of financial support for the minister to monies given by the members. In 1593 both Barrow and Greenwood were executed; but the church's pastor, Francis Johnson, after four years in prison and an abortive trip to the shores of Canada and back, escaped to Amsterdam. Here a number of other Separatists from England were already gathered, with the learned Henry Ainsworth, "the greatest of these Holland Separatists" as Dexter calls him, as their "teacher." The disputes which troubled this church Dr. White recounts very fairly, if perhaps at unnecessary length. He also shows the importance both of the *True confession . . . of Brownists* (1596) which "was almost certainly largely from the hands of Francis Johnson" and which "was translated into Latin and circulated to Europe's Protestant scholars" (p. 111), and of Ainsworth's fresh insistence on the theological necessity of a covenant promise in his book *The communion of saints* (1607, with five reprints before 1641).

The stage is now set for consideration of the famous Gainsborough-Scrooby congregations which came into being in the first decade of the seventeenth century with John Smyth and John Robinson as their respective and co-operating pastors. Here, once again, Dr. White points to the evidence for the *tradition*. "There is no reason to believe that Smyth and Robinson were innovators, rather were they the willing heirs of the Separatist tradition. In theory, Smyth insisted "point by point," in his *Principles and inferences concerning the visible Church* (1607), "on an outline of the visible Church's structure and practice which owed almost everything to Johnson and Barrow"; and in practice, "the Gainsborough-Scrooby Congregations were organized as replicas of Johnson's Congregation in Amsterdam" (p. 124). Further, in Smyth's "thinking about the Church the theology of the covenant was to resume something of the central place it had once held in the thought of Robert Browne" (p. 125). "For him, in the covenant promise of the local congregation the eternal covenant of grace became contemporary and man's acceptance of it was actualized in history" (p. 128).

Because of American interest in the Pilgrim Fathers, the story of John Robinson and his Leiden congregation is fairly well known. Recent writers have tended to discount Robinson's debt to the Separatists; but Dr. White demonstrates that "he never abandoned either the essential framework of his doctrine of the Church nor his sense that he and his people belonged to the Separatist tradition" (p. 156). As a Baptist, Dr. White naturally pays close attention to John Smyth. His efforts to detect logic in the frequent tacking by one who himself claimed to be "inconstant only in erroer" are perhaps not wholly convincing. If in these adventurous pioneers there was an element of

instability as well as originality, this is not really surprising. Whatever is to be said of Smyth's baptizing himself, an action for which Dr. White finds precedent but which, he allows, "certainly was rather odd," or of Smyth's eventual retreat, if the word may be permitted, not (as in Browne's case) to the Church of England but to a congregation of Dutch Mennonites, Dr. White has no difficulty in expounding Smyth's insistence on believers' baptism as "a further step in reinterpreting the way in which a believing man entered the covenant" by relating the covenant promise of the earlier Separatists more securely to a New Testament context (p. 135). It would be interesting to know whether many but Strict Baptists regard baptism in this way today.

In a final chapter Dr. White first asks how much of their Separatism these Englishmen owed to the Continental Anabaptists who were prior to, or contemporary with, them; he does not find certain evidence that they owed anything. He then looks towards the springing up of Baptist and Congregational churches in England from 1611 onwards, through the leadership of Robinson's friend, Henry Jacob, and of Smyth's friend, Thomas Helwys. He points out that "many of the questions . . . raised among the sectaries of the Great Rebellion were" those "posed by the English Separatists" (p. 164). More than this, the Separatists' churchmanship, "powerful and flexible as it was, provided the characteristic organization . . . of much of New England Protestantism and, ultimately, that of the United States" (p. 169).

Many of the Separatists' famous phrases—and they were men with a gift for pungent language—reappear here, as one would hope. But Dr. White's special contribution is that he has interwoven the history of their congregations with an exposition of their theology in a single and intelligible tradition; and that he has done this only after scrutinizing their writings in a manner more systematic and complete than was possible till Professor Carlson had gathered and edited them. Dr. White makes but scant reference to John Penry, "who was only linked with the Separatists during the last two years of his life and who only seems to have written one piece during his time with them" (p. 89, where Penry's identity with Martin Marprelate is accepted; Professor Carlson's edition of Penry's writings has yet to appear, but I believe he has decided against this identification). This may be right. I wonder, however, whether we might profitably have heard more of Giles Wigginton, of Sedbergh, who was involved in the Marprelate controversy, and a manuscript by whom in the Congregational Library includes unexamined accounts of his own experience as well as copies of treatises by Greenwood and Barrow which Professor Carlson has used. If Wigginton was not himself a Separatist, he is a telling example of the narrowness of the border at times between Separatist and Puritan. Since Amsterdam and Leiden come so prominently into the story unfolded by Dr. White, I also wonder if it might not have been enriched by reference to some Netherlands sources. On the one hand, there is a series of warnings against the Brownists by the Dutch Re-

formed Church's Synods.<sup>2</sup> On the other, relations were friendly at Middelburg, where a Dutch historian accepts the existence of "an unmistakable Congregational influence."<sup>3</sup>

I said that one reason for welcoming this book is that it makes a significant addition to knowledge. We may also welcome it as coming from Oxford and as published by the Oxford University Press (misprints are very few; Professor Carlson's name is mangled on p. 78). When a Free Church theological college first moved to Oxford, it was natural for its historian to contribute mainly to the studies of the patristic period which by tradition predominate there; but neither in later years has Mansfield College ever had a historian whose main interest professionally was in our own tradition. Now Regent's Park College is making up the deficit. Dr. White's book contains the substance of the thesis for which he gained the Oxford doctorate of philosophy in 1961. By dedicated work in this field in the intervening ten years he has won a reputation for sound scholarship which reaches beyond Oxford. It is heartening that with all his other concerns the Principal-elect of Regent's Park has found the time to publish this useful book. I earnestly hope his new duties will not be allowed to prevent him from carrying his researches further. We shall all benefit from the illumination he can give us.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To Dr. W. M. S. West's valuable study of Hooper, to which Dr. White refers in his discussion of the source of this covenant-doctrine, may now be added an essay (in English) by Dr. J. H. Primus in *Opstellen aangeboden aan Professor Dr. D. Nauta* (Leiden, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Reitsma and S. D. van Veen, *Acta der prov. en part. synoden*, Groningen, 1892, 8 vols.

<sup>3</sup> J. Reitsma, *Geschiedenis van de Hervorming en de Hervormde Kerk der Nederlanden*, 3rd edn., Utrecht, 1916, p. 643; following W. Goeters, *Die Vorbereitung des Pietismus in der Ref. Kirche der Niederlande*, Leipzig, 1911, p. 43.

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