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Puritans, Revisionists, and the English Revolution

S. K. BASKERVILLE

For some twenty-five years now the historiography of the English Revolution has been dominated by a powerful revisionism that has all but dismantled the older Whig and Marxist paradigms. Advancing a view of English society as fundamentally conservative, this revisionism directly challenges the assumptions of the traditional schools in all of its key arguments: a rejection of teleological history; a refusal to accept uncritically the role of ideas and ideology as carriers of political principle (focusing instead on personality, faction, patronage, and high politics); a denial of long-term causation rooted in social or economic change. The revisionist view of seventeenth-century England sees a world where people feared change, especially political change; and where order, unity, and consensus were the dominant political values, and the idea of politics as an arena of conflict, opposition, and party division was unacknowledged publicly. The revisionists point to an active and vibrant Royalist culture that was by no means wholly reactionary and to a population that was for the most part steadfastly neutral. Even in the minds of those who fought for Parliament, there was hesitancy, doubt, and fear. To the end, people resisted choosing sides, assuming responsibility, and moving forward too rapidly; often they were diffident and lacked confidence in the merits or success of their cause. In short, the revolution was not the easy product of the inexorable forces of progress but was hard and frightening, met with continual resistance, and stood in constant danger of failure. Indeed, in the end it *did* fail.¹

So effective has been this critique that it is the historiographical conservatives who have appeared skeptical and iconoclastic, while the liberal-left schools have

For their comments on drafts of this essay, I am grateful to Sabrina Baron, Glenn Burgess, John Morrill, John Pocock, and Kevin Sharpe, who first suggested the topic, as well as to Susan Green and readers at the *Huntington Library Quarterly*.

1. John Morrill, *The Nature of the English Revolution* (London and New York, 1993), chaps. 14 and 15. In quotations from seventeenth-century sources, spelling and punctuation have been modernized. In subsequent notes, the place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated.

been made to look like dogmatic defenders of the status quo. It is hardly accidental that a similar division reappears in some revisionist depictions of the two sides in the Civil War.²

Yet the revisionist approach in turn has been criticized for being largely negative: its opponents charge that it has proved more effective at destroying existing interpretations than in offering an alternative explanation of its own.³ As some have remarked, not entirely facetiously, the revisionist critique seems to imply that the Civil War did not happen, or at least that it cannot be explained.⁴ The revisionists are particularly sensitive to the charge that their distrust of radical political ideology seems to extend to a broader dismissal of all principles and ideas as agents of historical change.⁵

It may be in response to these criticisms that some revisionist scholars have, as it were, gotten religion. Until recently, revisionists have been ambivalent toward religion in general and Puritanism in particular, the role of which is often played down or dismissed.⁶ On the one hand, Puritans are depicted as a small and isolated band of zealots and busybodies whose self-righteous extremism commanded little sympathy from the wider society. On the other hand, they are presented as conservative, even reactionary, and apolitical, with little to distinguish their commonplace Calvinism from the mainstream of the English Church until they were provoked into rebellion by innovative royal ecclesiastical policies. "By the 1620s," comments Patrick Collinson, "puritanism was a socially respectable movement . . . and its leaders were among the . . . elite."⁷

2. The partisanship comes out in J. C. D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion* (1986). See Conrad Russell, *The Origins of the English Civil War* (1973), 5–6; and his *Parliaments and English Politics, 1621–1629* (1979), 429, where he paints "the picture of Parliamentarians as an ageing group, holding fast to old-fashioned Elizabethan reflexes."
3. See Geoff Eley and William Hunt, eds., *Reviving the English Revolution* (1988), especially the introduction.
4. See Howard Tomlinson, "The Causes of War: A Historiographical Survey," in H. Tomlinson, ed., *Before the English Civil War* (1983).
5. As some proponents have admitted: see, for example, Kevin Sharpe, *Politics and Ideas in Early Stuart England* (London and New York, 1989), introduction.
6. The best example is Christopher Haigh, who once declared in a seminar paper concerning Puritanism read at the Institute of Historical Research, London: "These are the godly, and I am sick of them." He went on to explain that his distaste was prompted by both personal and historiographical factors.
7. Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants* (1982), 149; quoted in Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (1992), 731. My synopsis is the conclusion often drawn from the work of Nicholas Tyacke, "Puritanism, Arminianism, and Counter-Revolution," in Conrad Russell, ed., *The Origins of the English Civil War* (1973). For example, in that volume Conrad Russell writes: "Dr. Tyacke has pointed out that there are 'reasons . . . against there being any necessary link between anti-Calvinist theology and special emphasis on the prerogative of kings. In practice it is true that during the personal rule of Charles I the two became closely associated, but this was largely because the supreme magistrate chose to support the Arminians.' Thus the connection between Puritanism and revolution was largely of Charles I's own making" (p. 23).

More recently, however, some revisionist scholars have turned to religion to account for a militancy and a conflict they find inexplicable by reference to secular political ideology. "While the Civil War was a *defensive* political operation, a defence of existing liberties against an arbitrary king," writes John Morrill, "it was an aggressive religious operation, a challenge to the whole of the existing structure and practice." That the two operations were so neatly separable in the early modern world has not gone unchallenged, and some have suspected a distinction without a difference in Morrill's pronouncement that "the English Civil War was not the first European revolution: it was the last of the Wars of Religion." This perspective does give primacy to Puritanism, yet it does so by depriving Puritanism of any larger political or social significance. Radical religion has become, for many historians, less an explanation than a kind of irreducible *deus ex machina* that must account for the conflict without making it very comprehensible to the modern world. As Blair Worden has observed, perhaps with Morrill's article in mind, "Puritan zeal has come to be treated almost as if it were an autonomous force of which there can be, or need be, no explanation, unless in the divine providence that Puritans themselves saw as its source."⁸



Only by confronting the content of religious zeal squarely can we begin to see the radicalism of the English Revolution and of Puritanism within it. Paradoxically perhaps, this is best achieved not by trying to show that the revisionists are wrong but by acknowledging how far they are right. It is true that the revisionist case has been challenged by more sophisticated proponents of the traditional schools, whose own arguments have been refined but not fundamentally altered.⁹ Yet rather than continuing to swing the pendulum in one or another direction, or trying to establish categorical positions where contemporaries were obviously torn, it may be time to adopt a more synthetic approach to the revolution, one

Sharpe dissents from this view and stands alone among revisionists in arguing for the political as well as the religious radicalism of Puritanism; see *Politics and Ideas*, 28–31.

8. Morrill, *Nature of the English Revolution*, 14, 68; for a rejoinder, see Ann Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (1991). I quote Blair Worden from "Revising the Revolution," *New York Review of Books*, 17 January 1991, 40. Peter Lake makes the same point about the work of Conrad Russell in a review article in the *Huntington Library Quarterly* 57 (spring 1994): 167–97.
9. The antirevisionist manifesto is Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, eds., *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics, 1603–1642* (1989). I have no quarrel with this group of scholars, except that their response seems to me unconstructive. By attempting to refute the revisionists head on, these "post-revisionists" concede to them the terms of debate while failing to profit from their contribution. As Worden observes, "The critics of Conrad Russell follow his scholarly methods and priorities, and if their answers are different they are essentially answers to his questions" ("Revising the Revolution," 40). See also Eley and Hunt, *Revising the English Revolution*.

that assigns a central role to radical religion.¹⁰ I make this suggestion based on two arguments: The first and hardly novel one is that Puritanism constituted not simply a dissenting religious movement whose agitation spilled over as an “accidental by-product” into political conflict but rather a true revolutionary political ideology.¹¹ The second and more important argument is that—contrary to the Whig and Marxist versions of the theme—it was not despite but because of the conservatism the revisionists highlight that a revolutionary political ideology was, as we might say, necessary. The full force of Puritan radicalism, in other words, can be grasped when it is viewed not as the absence of the conservative habits of mind that revisionists have identified in Royalists, neutrals, and Parliamentarians alike, but as a deliberate and conscious campaign to come to terms with those habits and break them down.¹²

The Whig thesis relied heavily on defining “radical political thought” and “ideology” largely as resistance theory, a genre of political theory that in fact owes little to Puritanism or religion at all.¹³ This definition has proved an easy target for the revisionists, who point out the absence of resistance writing before 1642. “It is . . . one of the strongest arguments . . . against those who see the early Stuart period as one of an increasing radicalisation of the ‘opposition’ to the Crown,” writes Morrill, “that there is so little evidence of anyone proclaiming a right of resistance to tyrants, let alone to James or Charles I.” Whig historians do indeed seem to have assumed that the mere acceptance of a right to resist explains why, at any given moment, one might wish to exercise it—as if resisting lawful authority is a virtue in and of itself. So the revisionists, who are unlikely to share this assumption, are wholly consistent (and I think correct) in debunking the honored place resistance literature has had in both the historiography of the Civil War and the political hagiography of the Anglophone nations.

10. Others have issued similar appeals, including Glenn Burgess (“On Revisionism: An Analysis of Early Stuart Historiography in the 1970s and 1980s,” *Historical Journal* 33, no. 3 [1990]), who also calls attention to the religious nature, and perhaps origins, of radicalism. Elsewhere Burgess writes, “We have recently been reminded . . . that the disruptive power of puritanism has been considerably underestimated in recent historiography”; see Glenn Burgess, *The Politics of the Ancient Constitution: An Introduction to English Political Thought, 1603–1642* (University Park, Pa., 1993), 170 (citing Sharpe and as well as Cust and Hughes). Kevin Sharpe, in “Religion, Rhetoric, and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 57 (summer 1994): 255–93, also suggests a “postrevisionist” synthesis based on religious discourse.
11. The most powerful statement of this argument is Michael Walzer’s *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), to which my own argument is strongly indebted.
12. This essay makes explicit historiographically the argument in my *Not Peace but a Sword: The Political Theology of the English Revolution* (1993).
13. As pointed out in the neo-Whig approach of Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978), vol. 2, esp. p. 323.

This flaw in the Whig argument does not, however, weaken the case for a radical opposition. Resistance tracts appeared only after 1642 because their function was to justify what had already taken place. If one is looking not for justifications after the event but for incitements to the act, the key document—one that should clearly be central in any study involving Puritanism—is the sermon. The political implications of this distinction between incitement and *ex post facto* justification were not often made explicit at the time, but they were nonetheless clearly understood. “I know many have taken great pains . . . to prove it lawful, in the present cause of God, the kingdom, and Parliament, to take up and make use of arms in the defense of religion, the church, and the truths of God,” the Presbyterian fanatic Joseph Boden noted in a political sermon of the early 1640s. Revolution, however, was instigated not by defending what was “lawful” but by attacking what was wicked:

But . . . I shall make bold to go one step further and . . . press the saints to . . . use manfully weapons of offense against the beasts of Babylon. And I shall hence and here boldly affirm that he who now startles and staggereth, delayeth, and refuseth with the Parliament and their party to bear and use arms against the prelates, papists, and atheists . . . is no other than a rebel and traitor against God.¹⁴

The content of Puritan religion as expressed in the sermon was usually less polemical than hortatory and less likely to argue against conservative thinking than to try to absorb its energy. In fact, the dynamics of Puritan ideology in relation to seventeenth-century social and political affairs can be seen in the way it at once testifies to and answers virtually every point in the revisionist characterization of the seventeenth-century world view: the role of accident in political events; the general apathy and conservatism of the English people; and the importance of Royalist cultural spectacle.

Philosophically, revisionism is skeptical of teleology and prefers to emphasize the role of contingency, accident, individual personality, and even the “momentum of events.” As Anthony Fletcher put it, “Great events do not necessarily have great causes.”¹⁵ Before the revolution, most people in England would probably have agreed. They seem not to have expected the events in which they became

14. Morrill, *Nature of the English Revolution*, 49–50, and chap. 15. Antirevisionist neo-Whigs have not successfully answered Morrill’s point; see J. P. Sommerville, *Politics and Ideology in England, 1603–1640* (1986). Compared with theories of legal resistance, Puritan ideas on holy war have received little attention from modern scholars. See Roland Bainton, “Congregationalism and the Puritan Revolution from the Just War to the Crusade,” in his *Studies on the Reformation* (Boston, 1963); Timothy George, “War and Peace in the Puritan Tradition,” *Church History* 53, no. 4 (1984); and Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, chap. 8.
15. Anthony Fletcher, *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (1981), 417.

caught up, and even when the pace of events began to accelerate, many seem to have been caught unawares. The fact that events began to develop their own momentum was one reason for attributing them to the hand of God. "I dare say you thought at first only to restrain the exorbitancy of the bishops and reform some faults of the service book, to rectify the irregularity of civil courts," one minister suggested to the House of Commons in 1644, "and God hath discovered innumerable abominations unto you and hath led you in paths not intended by you but well pleasing to himself." It is arguable that the entire providential view of history that the Puritans popularized was based on an awareness that human actions—and especially political actions—often result in unexpected outcomes. An important role of providentialist history was to gain control over what students of modern politics sometimes refer to as the "law of unintended consequences." As John Owen observed:

Whereas the end of all human wisdom in nations or the rulers of them is to preserve human society in peace and quietness . . . it so comes to pass for the most part, through the . . . wise disposal of God, that it hath a contrary end, and bringeth forth contrary effects throughout the world.

This idea of providential history as the resolution of contradictions stemmed from a conviction that human actions (including political actions) were by nature or design almost certain to create their own opposition, which in turn was destined to be resolved or defeated by the larger purpose of heaven. "All revolutions here below . . . are carried along according to the eternally-fixed purpose of God," Owen insisted, approaching the modern sense of the term revolution, "free in itself, taking neither rise, growth, cause, nor occasion from anything amongst the sons of men." The very purpose of the dialectic, then, was to overcome impediments and obstructions—external ones in the world and equally formidable ones in the mind. "Those rare pieces of divine providence . . . receive their greatest beauties and embellishments from the variety of human obstructions through which they forced their way," noted John Warren in 1656, adding that this would bring to pass the "revolutions" in God's plan: "In all the amazing changes and revolutions which our eyes have seen, there is a grand design of God uniformly carried on . . . through an incredible variety of men's counter-workings, all which shall serve to make it the more glorious in the issue."¹⁶

16. John Langley, *The Mournful Note of the Dove* (1644), 28–29; John Owen, *Works* (Edinburgh, 1862), 8:461; John Owen, *The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ* (1651), 3; John Warren, *Man's Fury Subservient to God's Glory* (1656), 31. See also Morrill, *Nature of the English Revolution*, 245.

As the revisionists might point out, the teleological or eschatological view that was so much a part (and such an enduring legacy) of the revolution itself was almost certainly not the dominant way of viewing history for most people before 1640, and even after that it required inculcation. It should be noted that it was the Puritan ministers who did most to popularized teleology by insisting that their “cause” was precisely what revisionist scholars deny it was: predestined. “Whosoever may be the enemies and whosoever may be the hazards, yet Christ and his church will be the conquerors,” promised Obadiah Sedgwick, “him and his church and his cause.” Such (apparent) certainty of the triumph of their cause was the only way they could instill in their followers the courage, solidarity, and readiness for self-sacrifice necessary to confront the dangers and discouragements of opposing an anointed king and a substantial part of the population who recognized him as such. “The churches must be militant,” warned Thomas Hill, “but however though their conflict be troublesome, yet their victory will be glorious and certain.” Those who were being asked to risk everything needed reassurance that the cause to which they would dedicate their lives could not fail. “Surely then it is good being on God’s side, to be of his party,” as Jeremiah Burroughs declared, “This is the strongest side; this certainly will have the victory.”¹⁷

Predestination, then, was not simply an obtuse theological dogma that happened under accidental circumstances to produce some political consequences; rather it was an inherently ideological and political doctrine. Although the political utility of predestination may not have been obvious before 1640, thereafter Puritan preachers made explicit that what was usually taken to refer to the “eternal” salvation of the individual soul might just as well be applied to the “temporal” salvation of the collective nation—or at least the righteous element within it. “As there is a decree goes forth in its appointed season for the church’s deliverance,” declared John Owen, “so there is a decree bringing forth the wicked’s destruction.” The “double decree” of predestination was by no means limited to the next world but guaranteed an appointed time for both the deliverance of the godly and the destruction of their enemies. “The eminent rescues of the church have been and shall be conjoined with the eminent destruction of its adversaries,” insisted Obadiah Sedgwick. Joseph Boden made the military utility of the doctrine explicit:

Who dares or can be a coward that hath it ascertained unto him
upon unquestionable warranty that without doubt he shall get the

17. Obadiah Sedgwick, *Haman’s Vanity* (1643), sig. A4v; Thomas Hill, *The Militant Church Triumphant over the Dragon and His Angels* (1643), 6; Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Glorious Name of God, The Lord of Hosts* (1643), 123.

better and overcome in the battle? That whether he kill or be killed, he shall be looked upon and honored as a conquerer? . . . The field is fought, and won; we only go forth to fetch in the trophies of victory.¹⁸

If Whig historians really did see the Civil War as the product of “inevitable” historical forces, it was in large part because their intellectual progenitors had a very practical propaganda interest in having people believe that it was. This component of Whig history, I would suggest, owes more to the religious than to the political and constitutional legacy of the Civil War.¹⁹ In fact, the importance of historical writing and the development of a historical consciousness in the Civil War were at least indirectly connected to the ideology they served.²⁰ Most people probably did have difficulty articulating an overtly ideological view before 1640; that difficulty was no doubt considerable if by “ideology” one means a sense of strong adherence to a political opinion or (as whiggish doctrine maintains) a keen desire for constitutional innovation.²¹ Yet, if we shift from “politics” to “religion” in the search for ideology, as proponents of almost all historiographical schools now seem to advocate, the picture is a little different. At first we encounter not merely an absence of overtly ideological commitment but also highly vocal testimonies to the apathy in the land. “Think how few are to be found in any place or any rank or society of men,” Stephen Marshall lamented in 1644, “who are to be numbered among them whose hearts are truly zealous for the Lord.” One could go further and (employing a technique of some revisionists) argue for the unpopularity of Puritan ideology using the Puritans’ own observations of the opposition they saw arrayed against them. “Have we not abundance that live this day . . . who have a zeal against zeal,” Marshall asked, “who are with all the heat that can be kindled in them set *against* zealous men . . . branding zeal for God with madness, with turbulency, with indiscretion?”²²

These are hardly disinterested observations; the entire point in voicing them was to whip up fervor among the already zealous and those whom the preachers

18. John Owen, *Ebenezer* (1648), 9, 30–31; Sedgwick, *Haman’s Vanity*, 18–19; Joseph Boden, *An Alarm Beat Up in Zion to War against Babylon* (1644), 11–12, 20.
19. On the modern notion of progress as the secularized holdover of religious eschatology, see Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (1949; reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass., 1972).
20. The role of secular historical thought in the Civil War is explored by J. G. A. Pocock in a forthcoming article, “Thomas May and the Narrative of Civil War.”
21. For example, Sommerville, *Politics and Ideology*.
22. Stephen Marshall, *A Divine Project to Save a Kingdom* (1644), 38–39. Here I am simply following revisionist scholars, who often quote Puritan preachers to this effect; for example, Sharpe, *Personal Rule*, 746–47.

called “lukewarm.” Still, as testimonies to the resistance that militant Puritanism met, they do indicate both what the Puritan agitators were up against and how they attempted to channel it to their own ends. In fact, the Puritans’ exhortations were based on the conviction that a certain fire did burn within the hearts of even the most apathetic, apolitical, and socially dysfunctional souls; their own task was simply to fan the flames in the right direction. “What ardent desires, what flames can they send after their sins and how dull, how sluggish in seeking him whom our soul should love!” remarked Henry Wilkinson. And according to John Preston, “Zeal is nothing else but the inten[sity] of all holy affections and actions.” This call for “zeal” indicates how in religion, unlike politics as traditionally conceived, the whole point was to arouse and enlist active ideological devotion for its own sake. By emphasizing the strength of the opposition they faced, the Puritan preachers sought to redouble the resolve of their followers, since the central feature of the Puritan dialectic was that it thrived on weakness and feelings of powerlessness. “We have . . . kingdoms to subdue, . . . justice to execute, . . . popish alien armies to fight with,” Joseph Caryl warned the House of Commons in 1643, “and we are but weak.” Yet what made them strong was faith:

How then shall we out of our weakness become strong, strong enough to carry us through these mighty works, strong enough to escape these visible dangers . . . if not by faith? . . . We must go to counsel by faith, and to war by faith; we must pull down by faith and build by faith.²³

The ideological energy of not only Puritanism but also Protestantism itself might be seen in this, the most important theme of Puritan preaching, even into the 1640s: not Laudian ceremonies (which were mentioned only incidentally), nor the “millenarianism” that has dominated so much recent literature, but the old Protestant battle cry of justification by “faith.” “Fight the good fight of faith,” Thomas Hill urged the Long Parliament: “It is God’s. Such fight the Lord’s battles . . . with certainty of victory.” If we step back for a moment to gain a perspective on English Protestantism as a whole, it is possible that far from there being an absence of ideology, even the most moderate quarters of English society were so saturated with a relatively new ideological enthusiasm that historians have had difficulty getting a clear view of it. Although in terms of secular politics there may indeed have been little focused or oppositional ideological ferment

23. Henry Wilkinson, *Lukewarmness in Religion* (1640), 30; John Preston, *The Breastplate of Faith and Love* (1634), 285; Joseph Caryl, *A Sacred Covenant* (1643), 37.

before 1640, one might argue that most of the nation had for decades been swept up in what was the first and greatest wave of ideological fervor in modern Western history: the Protestant Reformation. If Puritanism is viewed as the political vanguard of Protestantism, the Civil War might be seen not as a clash of opposing ideologies but as a fissure between two sides that were moving at different rates in the same ideological direction—at least until the end, when Laudianism dug in its heels.²⁴



The context of the Protestant Reformation at least puts into a different perspective another plank in the revisionist platform. The revisionists have highlighted an unwavering and even militantly determined neutralism on the part of those so opposed to war that they refused to take sides or to acquiesce in the conflict, and were even willing to take up arms against both the contending armies.²⁵ Yet the very fact that neutralism was active rather than passive indicates that instead of being the ideologically inert center point between two extremes, neutralism was somewhere between the moderate and extreme points of an ideological spectrum that was, in its entirety, skewed markedly to the Protestant “left,” since the religious element appears to have been decisive even among those reluctant to take sides on other grounds. The Shropshire gentleman Jonathan Langley explained that since both sides in the conflict swore to uphold Protestantism, “what reason have I therefore to fall out with either?”²⁶ As a point of contrast, one need only imagine for a moment the very different response that would have been provoked among this silent majority of the educated and articulate gentry had a similarly determined “minority” of Catholic clergy used their pulpits to promote armed insurrection against the king.²⁷

To argue along these lines is not to deny that Puritans were viewed as religiously and politically extreme by those who inclined to neutrality. Indeed, the

24. Hill, *Militant Church*, 12. Currently, the favored method of measuring the strength of Protestantism is through hatred for popery. This method reflects a strange view of Protestantism, whereby its positive presence is measured through one of its most negative qualities. Although hatred for popery may be a barometer of Protestant sympathy at its most popular (or vulgar) level, I prefer these more ideological indications. See Peter Lake, “Antipopery: The Structure of a Prejudice,” in Cust and Hughes, *Conflict in Early Stuart England*.
25. John Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces: Conservatives and Radicals in the English Civil War, 1630–1650* (1980).
26. Quoted in David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–60* (Oxford, 1985), 2.
27. A similar approach might be taken to Royalism. Some revisionist scholars have sought to demonstrate the active and creative, rather than simply reactionary, character of Royalism: for example, Ronald Hutton,

substantial presence of “neuters” is attested by the Puritan preachers themselves, who rejected anything less than ideological purity and total dedication. “It is not sufficient to do the people of God no hurt, but we must do them good,” insisted Henry Wilkinson, invoking the obvious texts: “We must engage ourselves in Christ’s quarrel, for he that is a neuter or indifferent, he is an enemy. He that is not with me, saith Christ, he is against me.” What might be considered most significant about such statements is the need to make them: they attest at once to the real existence of neutralism, as the revisionists might say, and to the polarizing power of Calvinism that refused to recognize any middle ground in politics or in war as well as in theology. “Whether you be soldiers of Christ in a militant way . . . or whether yet you be vassals of the devil, here are no neuters,” as Francis Peck asserted, “You are certainly every one of you militant either under Christ’s or Satan’s banner.” The religion that had been attacking theological moderation and spiritual neutralism with its stark polarization between the godly and the ungodly long before anyone thought of war required no major conceptual shift to extend the same principles to political and military conflict. “Such as stand neuters are ordinarily crushed,” as Stephen Marshall declared in 1643. “The Lord acknowledges no neuters.”²⁸

Revisionists have frequently pointed to the hesitancy, doubt, fear, and lack of confidence among the Parliamentarians themselves. Before the outbreak of war, Parliament was hardly fit as a revolutionary cadre, Kevin Sharpe has argued, being led by a “disorganized, divided, and undisciplined House of Commons.” Conrad Russell has likewise written that most members of Parliament were not struggling to achieve increased political responsibilities: “They were struggling to avoid them.”²⁹ The Puritan ministers would probably have agreed with this assessment, judging by their invective, since even after 1642 the lack of discipline in the House of Commons and the presence of members who were trying to avoid political responsibilities were among the principal objects of that “brotherly admonition” in which the Puritan ministers specialized. “If there be any amongst you that drive your own designs, and seek your own ends more than the public good, and seek your own ends to the detriment of the public good,” Edmund Calamy warned members of the Long Parliament, “these are crying

The Royalist War Effort, 1642–1646 (1982). For parallels in both personality and policy between Archbishop Laud and the Puritans, see Kevin Sharpe, “Archbishop Laud and the University of Oxford,” in *Politics and Ideas*, introduction. Royalism is beyond the scope of this essay, but I seek to demonstrate religious parallels in a forthcoming work on the regicide, including Royalist reactions.

28. Wilkinson, *Lukewarmness*, 23; Francis Peck, *The Good Fight of Faith* (1645), 12; Stephen Marshall, *Meroz Cursed* (1642), 9, 12, 22.

29. Kevin Sharpe, *Faction and Parliament* (1978), 42; and Russell, *Parliaments*, 8.

abominations, and the Lord calls for a Parliament repentance this day.” Instilling discipline in political bodies such as Parliament and convincing members to accept responsibility for the nation’s problems were in fact major aims of Puritan preaching, in pursuit of which they had preached for decades to the assizes and other local political gatherings. “You must look upon yourselves as trusted with the making of all necessary laws and the strengthening of those already made . . . for the purging the land from whatever filthiness is in it,” Cornelius Burges told the House of Commons, “which till you be careful to effect, the sins of particular persons will become national and the guilt thereof will lie at your door.” Collective guilt was especially useful for instilling discipline:

And if it doth appear that you have taken more care in settling your own liberties than in settling of religion, if you have taken more care to build your own houses than God’s house, this is a crying sin, and this makes you accessory to a thousand sins that are committed in the kingdom.³⁰

But how far did this activism extend to a politics of conflict and contention, which revisionists tend to deny existed? Certainly, if before 1640 unity and consensus did not always rule political life, everyone professed to believe that they should. “There was no such thing as an ‘opposition’ in parliament . . . because adversary politics had not yet been invented,” writes Professor Rabb, summing up the revisionist case: “Consensus politics ruled parliamentary behaviour.”³¹ Although Rabb and others have demonstrated that the case may be overstated, much of its essential truth is demonstrated by the way Puritan preachers directly confronted an inclination to seek out consensus and esteem unity; if people did not share this mindset, after all, there would be no need for the Puritans to break it down. “Be not offended,” Joseph Caryl assured the Long Parliament, “if in some cases where nature bids agree, the gospel bids divide.” That some might indeed be so “offended” accounts for the need for an ideological engine to overcome precisely such hesitations, and the fact that it was Puritan religion that did so is made plain by texts whose use was by no means new or limited to the 1640s. “Wheresoever Christ cometh there will be opposition,” Richard Sibbes had observed years before the Long Parliament: “Wheresoever Christ cometh he breedeth division, not only between man and himself, but between man and man.” If “opposition” was a concept alien to politics before the war, it had been an integral part of Calvinist religion for some time:

30. Edmund Calamy, *England’s Antidote against the Plague of Civil War* (1645), 25, 27; Cornelius Burges, *The Necessity and Benefit of Washing the Heart*, 35, 38, in *Two Sermons* (1645).

31. Theodore K. Rabb, “The Role of the Commons,” *Past and Present*, no. 92 (August 1981): 59.

Betwixt us and the blessed state we aim at there is much opposition. . . . Good persons and good things they are opposed in the world. Christ rules in this world “in the midst of his enemies.” He must have enemies therefore to rule in the midst of; he must be opposed. And where there is opposition between us and the good things that we must of necessity have, we must break through the opposition, which cannot be done without violence.

From 1642 such implicit religious principles became explicit political ones, and although well aware of how ardently their listeners desired peace, the ministers nevertheless insisted that harmony and peace existed only in a dialectical relationship with conflict and war. “Better have a holy and just war than an irreligious, dishonorable, and unsafe peace,” as Christopher Tesdale insisted in 1644, “It is better . . . to be at peace with God . . . than to be at peace with men.” With some men in particular it was apparently better to be at war. “Make peace with them now and they will soon make war with us and ours,” as Joseph Boden warned, “There is no peace with, as well as to, the wicked.”³²



One of the most fundamental revisionist arguments is to point to the fear of change, and especially political change, in a society that had never experienced it at a rate now familiar in modern society. Keith Thomas has described “an essentially pre-political world . . . where innovation has to be disguised as a return to the past, and where the fact of change is essentially unrecognised.”³³ Not only did the most militant Puritans share this fear; they also used the fear of change to encourage belief in an eternal and immutable God who alone could transcend it. “God’s eminency is . . . discovered by his eternity and immutability,” declared Thomas Hodges in an early address to the Long Parliament: “He changes not.” By contrast, all the world apart from God was in a state of commotion, continually in agitation, caught up in the endless vicissitudes of time and the perpetual cycles of birth, growth, death, and decay. “Indeed, there is nothing but change in all things else,” Hodges observed: “They are full of motion and revolution.” Hodges’s description illustrates the shift in the meaning of “revolution” from the cyclical sense it carried in the natural world to the eschatological one it was developing in society and politics:

32. Joseph Caryl, *David’s Prayer for Solomon* (1643), 30; Richard Sibbes, *Works* (Edinburgh, 1862–64), 6:300; Christopher Tesdale, *Jerusalem; or, a Vision of Peace* (1644), 10; Boden, *Alarm*, 18.

33. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), 427.

There is the wheel of times and seasons: "seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night." . . . Then there is the wheel of generation. . . . Some die, and others are born. . . . There is the wheel of state and condition. Look upon bodies politic. . . . Either their own overgrown greatness or else some hand of violence hath destroyed them, so that except in history we know not where to find them.

Puritan radicalism did not ignore or arise despite the fear of change; it used and even thrived on that fear. "Since all these worldly things are so mutable," John Whincop advised members of the Long Parliament, "let it be thy wisdom to set thine heart upon those things which are immutable and cannot be taken away." Such injunctions may not have been intended in a political sense, but they were quickly extended to one, and although initially the consequences might appear conservative, they quickly became radicalizing and polarizing. After all, the same search for a fixed point in a changing world that might lead some to invest renewed faith in both traditionally sacred objects of veneration and traditional political institutions could simultaneously lead others to abandon them altogether. "If he be God enduring forever," the relatively moderate Samuel Rutherford asked Parliament in 1644, "what fools are we to place our hope in a King that shall die? He is but a man and may change."³⁴

Change was indeed something to be feared in seventeenth-century England. By pointing out this fear, the revisionists have not only provided a corrective to the simplicities of the older teleological history; they may also have identified, perhaps unwittingly, the cause of the revolution. For because people feared change it does not follow that they simply ignored it or pretended that it did not exist as it was occurring all around them. Instead they sought to control it. Politically, it was precisely the point where Puritans appear most conservative, even reactionary, that they also justified their most important innovations. The Puritan insistence that church government, having been prescribed by the Word of God, was therefore fixed and unalterable forever, stemmed from the need not only for a bulwark against change but also for a spiritual anchor that would allow people to feel secure enough to permit secular government to change as necessary with the changes in the world. "As in natural, so in civil and moral things, there is a double alteration," explained the relatively moderate Matthew Newcomen as early as 1643: "There is a perfective alteration. And there is a corruptive alteration." The latter was relatively straightforward, and the effort to

34. Thomas Hodges, *A Glimpse of God's Glory* (1642), 37–39; John Whincop, *Israel's Tears for Distressed Zion* (1645), 16; Samuel Rutherford, *A Sermon* (1644), 53–54.

halt or reverse it had been a central part of the ministers' platform for years:

To alter religion so as to corrupt religion was the plot and work of the popish prelates and their faction. To alter their alterations, to antiquate their innovations, to reduce religion to its pure original perfection (which cannot be done without alteration of something introduced), that was the purpose and work of the Parliament, and for this it is our adversaries' cry against them, "They will alter religion."

Once again such passages illustrate at once both the difficulty that contemporaries experienced in trying to accept change and the uncompromising determination of the ministers that they nevertheless do so. For whereas religious change involved simple restoration to a previous perfect state, political change entailed movement toward an ever-receding state of perfection. "Aye, but then the Parliament will alter the government of the kingdom," Newcomen continued:

Yes. Just like they altered religion. As in religion such alterations as tend to perfection are not to be condemned. So likewise in polity and civil government . . . upon just grounds there ought to be some changes.

Whereas the church would simply be restored to its pristine purity, after which stability and immutability would be forever ensured (or so it was said), the state as a human creation would be in need of constant adjustment to keep pace with changes in human society. Thus the more radical John Owen:

Laws and ordinances and forms of government, though very useful in the first institution of them, yet afterwards, through change of times, they may degenerate and become unuseful, it may be prejudicial and detrimental, crossing that very end for which they were ordained. Thus it is with human laws and constitutions, the best, the wisest of them, they are like the men that made them, *mutable*. . . . It is the privilege of God's laws, the never degenerate, never prove unuseful, much less detrimental to the persons to whom they are given and by whom they are observed. But human laws and constitutions may, which when they do, no reason why men should be so irrecoverably concluded under them as that they should not by lawful ways and means . . . *seek an alteration for the better*.

Perhaps religious rigidity provided the social and psychological stability upon which political innovation could confidently be effected, so that people might feel comfortable with change by exercising control over it and directing it toward

desirable ends. "There are few things that belong to civil affairs but are alterable upon the incomprehensible variety of circumstances," as Owen assured his listeners: "These alter and change the very nature of them and make them good or bad—that is, useful or destructive. . . . Importune insisting on the most useful things without respect to alteration of seasons is a sign of a narrow heart." In that such statements seem to be the first explicit recognition of the existence and desirability of popularly effected political change as the normal course of things, they represented an extension of the words "reform" and "reformation" from a narrowly religious to a wider secular and political meaning. "There must be a court reformation, a country reformation, a city reformation, church and state reformation, a general reformation," announced Edmund Calamy in a parliamentary sermon in 1641. Reform became a frenetic effort on the part of all persons to remodel social institutions from the lowest to the highest—and it is perhaps not too much to suggest that this marks the beginning of the word "reform" in its modern sense. "Reformation must be universal," Thomas Case told the House of Commons in 1641:

Reform all places, all persons and callings. Reform the benches of judgments, the inferior magistrates. . . . Reform the church. . . . Reform the universities. . . . Reform the cities. Reform the countries. Reform inferior schools of learning. Reform the sabbath. Reform the ordinances, the worship of God. . . . You have more work to do than I can speak.³⁵

Here it is apparent that contemporaries did recognize a distinction between church and state, one that at times could serve purposes along the lines Morrill suggests: to separate a militant spirituality from a conservative politics. "Christian liberty . . . doth not at all entrench upon that order and those civil degrees which he hath most comely established in the world," according to William Sclater: "A politic inequality is not against a spiritual equality." But while the preachers might reiterate (and usually with complete sincerity) the commonplaces used to buttress political authority, their religious principles were subtly but steadily undermining authority's traditional foundations. This process was most visible in the preachers' assault upon the manipulation of mysteries for not only ecclesiastical but also political purposes. "In matters that concern the state men may with a good conscience trust the state, though they do not understand how they be for the good of the state," claimed the militant Jeremiah Burroughs: "But I may not

35. Matthew Newcomen, *The Craft and Cruelty of the Church's Adversaries* (1643), 69; John Owen, *The Laboring Saint's Dismission to Rest* (1651), *Works*, 8:349; Edmund Calamy, *England's Looking Glass* (1641), 60; Thomas Case, *Two Sermons* (1641), 2:18–22.

trust any in spiritual things so, but I must know the thing itself and the ground of it, in matter of God's worship, before I can obey it." But even this double standard was seldom maintained so categorically for long, and the demystification of images and ceremonies in church worship led the way to a similar disillusionment with the pretensions of political authority. Revelation of the arcane mysteries of heaven also opened the way for the most carefully guarded secrets of state to be similarly exposed to popular scrutiny. "It is an abominable conceit to distinguish religion from policy and government, as if the reasons of religion were one and the reasons of state were another," Sibbes asserted years earlier:

For the same heavenly spirit of God that reveals the mysteries of salvation reveals likewise to me the mysteries of state. Christ hath the keys of heaven, of the mysteries of God; and he hath the keys of all earthly policy . . . in heavenly mysteries and then for matters of policy and government of states and commonwealths.³⁶



Here we begin to get to the heart of Puritan radicalism and its assault on the "mysteries" of not only religious but also political rituals. I hesitate to describe this contribution as revisionist, but in recent years enormous attention has been devoted to the political culture of Royalism in particular, even by scholars who would reject the designation of revisionist.³⁷ The political significance of art, drama, literature, even music—and above all the rituals and ceremonies by which they were patronized, produced, and performed—has been subjected to new examination (and was hardly neglected even before). Overwhelmingly, it has been the culture of the court and therefore of Royalists that has been studied, though the same techniques have been applied to their eventual Parliamentary opponents.³⁸ This is logical enough, since Puritans are hardly known for their patronage of the arts, and their hatred of ceremonies is virtually defining. Still, it should be borne in mind that the vogue for studying culture—like the larger and parallel fashion for "ritual"—does by its nature bias the pursuit in one partisan direction, since these were precisely the things against which the Puritans were campaigning.³⁹

36. William Sclater, *Civil Magistracy by Divine Authority* (1652), 15; Jeremiah Burroughs, *A Sermon* (1646), 34; Sibbes, *Works*, 3:279.

37. See, for example, R. J. Smuts, *Court Culture and the Origins of a Royalist Tradition in Early Stuart England* (Philadelphia, 1987).

38. Professor Charles Carleton observed this in a presentation to the sixth conference of the Centre for Seventeenth-Century Studies at Durham, England, in July 1995.

The cultural clash between the court and the Puritans is too well known to require further elaboration here. Once again, however, the point is not simply that a potential for ideological conflict existed, but that such conflict was self-generating: the very existence of what scholars have seen as a vibrant and popular Royalist culture, far from negating its mirror-image in Puritanism, was the occasion for it—the impetus for its own opposition. I do not want to contribute further here to the popular stereotype of the Puritans as cultural philistines. But whatever truth there may be in that stereotype, what attracted Puritan ire in culture as in religion was precisely the subliminal political messages that scholars have detected: the quasi-sacramental rituals of royal processions; the semireligious vignettes by which royal artistic as well as political patronage was acted out; the near-blasphemous flattery of court sermons; the provocative graven images, such as the ceiling of the Whitehall banqueting house.⁴⁰

For the most part, Puritans held their tongues when it came to the secular cultural images and performances of the court (not to mention those of their own lay patrons), which were sponsored directly by the Crown, so it is difficult to present their response to these specifically. But the one matter on which they did not hold their tongues was also the point at which cultural and political images joined hands: the increasing ceremonialism in the English Church during the years leading up to the Civil War. For all the attention devoted to royal and court ceremonial, it seems odd that no one points directly to the most obvious potential for conflict: that the rituals and ceremonies of state were simply the secular counterparts of similar performances that, simultaneously promoted in the Church, were the direct focal point of Puritan disobedience. The connection, symbolic as it may have been, was not lost on contemporaries. “It may be justly our complaint on these men,” remarked Charles Herle of the Arminian and “popish” court intellectuals who defended and probably conceived these practices, that “they fancy God as an earthly king, with his courtiers and favorites about him, at a distance from his other subjects.” That both sides understood a political as well as a religious message is indicated by Royalist justifications of ecclesiastical ceremony in the language of divine-right monarchy. “He is the Lord’s anointed . . . and therefore God forbid we should touch the King,” according to Thomas Laurence: “And this [ceremony] is the Lord’s anointed too, and therefore God forbid we should wrong the Church; for as a disrespect to the

39. For example, Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion*. Kevin Sharpe, in “A Commonwealth of Meanings,” notes the connection (*Politics and Ideas*, 48–50). That essay also contains the most succinct summation of some of the political implications of high culture.

40. See Sharpe, *Politics and Ideas*; Smuts, *Court Culture*; and Linda Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (Boston, 1990), esp. 14, 17, 18, 29.

chair of state reflects upon the King, because he is represented there, so doth a disrespect to the Church reflect upon God, because he is there." The two forms of majesty interacted with and reinforced each other, and not simply in an abstract theory but in visible rituals performed and witnessed by the populace as part of God's own appointed worship. "It is the house of religion, God's house," said William Laud (who was, almost literally, the architect of the more assertive policy), "and it is the house of the kingdom too."

And it is fit, very fit it should be so, the court and the great temple of God's service together, that God and the King may be neighbors, that as God is always near to preserve the King, so the King might be near to serve God, and God and the King cannot meet . . . without a solemnity.⁴¹

Similarly for their part, the unguarded comments of Puritan preachers—rare but not nonexistent—on secular ritual are revealing of the sentiment underlying their campaign against the ecclesiastical version. "So worldly princes carry things thus, and it is needful in some sort," Richard Sibbes conceded: "People must have shows and pomp; the outward man must have outward things to astonish it withal. It is policy of state so to do." Such grudging acknowledgments of possible utility cast only a thin veil over their disdain. "But Christ came in another manner," Sibbes added: "Christ came not into the world to execute his kingdom and office in such pomp and noise." While Puritan preachers sometimes conceded that such mysteries could be expedient in maintaining order, and they occasionally admitted a reluctance to abandon them too abruptly (at least in the state), sermonizers argued that measures of state now had to be more substantial than mere spectacle to be effective. "There is some use of these trappings to the common sort . . . to come to the judgement seat with pomp, state, and attendance . . . as that which procures some terror and awe in the people," Samuel Ward acknowledged, "Yet . . . these complements without the substance are but . . . the sophistry of government."⁴²

The political significance that had always been implicit in Puritan iconoclasm was thus betrayed once the Puritans began directing their sacrilege against political as well as religious icons, especially the one John Dury described as "that idol which politicians call the reason of state." Excessive or cynical devotion to the expedients of statecraft, unmindful of those of God, itself amounted to the worshipping of an idol and was as pernicious as bowing down to a graven image. "It

41. Charles Herle, *Ahab's Fall by His Prophets' Flatteries* (1644), 10; Thomas Laurence, *A Sermon Preached before the King's Majesty at Whitehall* (1637), 12; William Laud, *Works* (Oxford, 1847–52), 1:3.

42. Sibbes, *Works*, 1:29; 7:527; Samuel Ward, *Jethro's Justice of the Peace* (1618), 9–13.

is a hard question,” remarked Nathaniel Hardy, “whether is greater idolatry to prefer reasons of state before principles of piety or to worship a golden calf.” In other words, reason of state did not merely impel politicians to tolerate idolatry in the Church; it was itself an act of idolatry in the state—and one of which great men and public officeholders were both subjects and objects. “There is a politic idolatry as well as spiritual,” Anthony Burges insisted: “We may make a magistrate an idol, and that is when we will obey him against God. When we have no other ground for our worship or religion than the authority of a magistrate, we look not to the word of God. This is politic idolatry.” Only by worshipping God exclusively could people learn to stop worshipping their social and political superiors, and the legitimacy of secular as well as religious authority could be called into question by Puritan political iconoclasm, especially when it impinged directly upon matters of worship, but even when it did not. “O how fain would some return to Egypt!” lamented Thomas Case in 1646: “At best brethren we have but changed our idolatry, not forsaken it. We set up new idols every day. . . . We make gods of anything, gods of our Parliament and gods of our armies, a god of anything but him that is our God.” Above all, it was monarchs that were decried as objects of idolatrous attachment: deified in popular belief as well as by dubious political theories, exalted in grandiose processions and splendid spectacles, worshiped with lavish ceremonies and glorified in opulent pageants, civil as well as ecclesiastical, by which they enthralled the simple and arrogated to themselves the homage due only the King of kings. “Kingdoms, we know, follow their kings,” Sibbes observed long before republican ideas were commonly (or safely) expressed: “For commonly the idol of the people is their king, and being led by sense and not by faith they fear him more than they fear God.”⁴³



The point here is not that Puritans were more radical than revisionists maintain (though I think they were) or more conservative than Whigs and Marxists imply (I think they were more radical). The point is that the world of the revisionists—a world dominated by traditional high politics, faction, intrigue, patronage, aristocratic revolt, ritual, and ceremony, the world of court and popular culture that is also largely the seventeenth-century world as depicted in recent scholarship—all this was precisely what the Puritans rejected and sought to replace with their own politics of ideas and their own ideology. Puritanism was a dialectical move-

43. John Dury, *Israel's Call* (1646), 36; Nathaniel Hardy, *Licentious Liberty and Oppressing Tyranny* (1647), 17; Anthony Burges, *The Magistrate's Commission from Heaven* (1644), 18; Thomas Case, *Deliverance-Obstruction* (1646), 32–33.

ment that directly confronted the very real conservatism of English society and diverted the emotions society could no longer absorb into a radical alternative. One can contest how successful the Puritans were (as revisionists do), but it does not seem very instructive to debate how radical or conservative an individual or society was at any given moment, since the whole point was that the entire society, as well as each individual, experienced deep division.

Perhaps, too, by avoiding semantic quibbles concerning whether this or that was or was not a “revolution” and by focusing on the first example, we may learn something about not merely the English Civil War but also this most problematic of modern phenomena. Each of the paradigmatic modern revolutions is now under scrutiny by scholars who seek to demote it from its revolutionary status. This historiographical fashion may reflect a healthy skepticism toward the romance that revolution once had, though I fear it demonstrates the opposite: the concept of revolution is so romanticized that these historians cannot bring themselves to bestow the title on any specific, and inevitably imperfect, instance. Today it is conservatives who claim to be perpetrating “revolutions” against the dogmas of the liberal-left. It is perhaps an ironic consequence of the triumph of democratic ideals that today even conservatives seem to feel the need to adopt the mantle of speaking for “the people” and to claim an incipient public opinion on their side.⁴⁴ An age that continues to see disturbing things done in the name of (and by) “the people” should be trying to understand both the genuine motives and the real dangers of popular revolutionary movements rather than suggesting they did not exist.

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44. Among many historiographical examples are J. J. Scarisbricke, *The Reformation and the English People* (1984); and Christopher Haigh, *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987).