

*Lee Gatiss: The Church Militant and Martyred,  
from the Reformation to Today*

## The Church Militant and Martyred: From the Reformation to Today

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I was at a reception earlier this week, in 10 Downing Street. It was most encouraging to hear the Prime Minister speak about her faith, and encourage other Christians to speak about our “faith in Christ.”<sup>1</sup> But the reason I mention this event is that the reaction to it has been enlightening, not least with regards to some of the issues we will be looking at in this paper. Theresa May’s office tweeted a video of her speech at that event, with the quote “Our Christian heritage is something we can all be proud of.”<sup>2</sup> Some of the replies on Twitter and Facebook were perhaps predictable, but are worth some examination. What do they tell us about Christian involvement in society today? What do they say about the place of our faith in Christ in the public square, in twenty-first century Britain?

One Facebooker said,

But what she says and what her government does are totally the opposite. She needs to come down to a parish like mine and see the awfulness in which people live and work; and it is getting worse because of TORY policies. It’s a disgrace to the gospel.

Another replied,

Faith is demonstrated by actions and attitudes more than words. May’s words are contradicted by her political decisions & actions. She is no friend of poor people, or disabled people, or unemployed people.

Mrs May had not claimed that her government was getting everything right, of course, or that every policy of hers was a direct application of the gospel. All she said was “Our Christian heritage is something we can all be proud of.” Yet that did not stop people reacting to a Christian saying something positive about Christianity in this country. Twitter can be even more brutal than Facebook. It’s surprising how rude people can be in only 140 characters. Here are some of the tweets which responded directly to the Prime Minister:

- Shame you don’t show and practice Christian principles.

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<sup>1</sup> For the text of her speech, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/shrove-tuesday-reception-2017-prime-ministers-speech--2> (accessed 28 February 2017).

<sup>2</sup> See <https://twitter.com/Number10gov/status/836671325422903297> (accessed 28 February 2017).

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- you have no right to be proud of Christianity; Jesus would be horrified by this govt's actions to the poor, refugees, disabled. And families.
- except now we are more of an atheist society than Christian. Out of touch with modern society.
- How many British Christian Gypsies or Travellers were at this Number 10 event?
- If she believes in freedom of religion, why force Catholic schools to teach 4 year olds about sex?
- shame you don't show Christian values when it comes to caring for the disadvantaged.
- YOUR Christian heritage is something YOU can all be proud of. I am an atheist and I live in the UK which is a secular nation.
- so many anti gay rights people in one room. This just after saying no to a gay rights advisor.
- Next week we should have a party with the tooth fairy, monsters under the bed, fairies, voldemort, Xenu & Mo's flying horse.
- and how Christian is it to be cutting the benefits of those who rely on them and arbitrarily deporting people?
- Make the most of it while it lasts - the UK is rapidly becoming Islamic & no Christian things will be allowed!
- Then give us more than lip service, less persecution and protect Christian values!
- we went to war with many countries for the sake of spreading Christian missionaries not very proud of that tbf.
- No true Christian would punish the poor and vulnerable by cutting spending on benefits, health care and social care. #liarliar.
- is it though? How exactly? The wars in the name of @god or the claim our forefathers chatted with the creator of the universe?
- I object to this rose tinted heritage which included murder, nothing to be proud of. Out with religion from state institutions.
- except the millions of us that don't need imaginary sky friends to get us through the day
- can we please have a proper separation of church and state? Pluralism means we all thrive.
- This is dangerous. World leaders should never ally themselves with any religion IMO.

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- Which part should we be most proud of? Misogyny? Homophobia? Sexual abuse by clergy maybe?
- I feel ashamed of our Christian heritage. Crusades, witch hunts, N Ireland, child abuse, compulse w'ship. Outweighs any good.
- So why do you allow the barbaric torture of animals during Halal and the barbaric torture of children during FGM?
- is it Christian to deny help to those in need, like our poor, our homeless, our disabled, and refugees?

Not all the responses were quite so negative of course. A few were more positive:

- Jesus preached #forgiveness- this society is very tolerant open and forgiving.
- Well done ma'am. Religious leaders play a vital role in making the country and the leadership to be in the correct moral line.

And one was from a Christian who had noticed that this was all happening on the same day as some street evangelists were being convicted of a public order offence after preaching the uniqueness of Christ:

- Hope you will intervene and help those Christians who have been convicted for sharing their christian Faith in public place!

What does this have to do with my brief? The brief I was given was this:

*to paint in the background of the Middle Ages, and then concentrate on certain periods since when the church has been on the ascendancy in the culture (e.g., the 1650s in England) and times of great persecution (e.g., the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the ensuing persecution of the Huguenots). The speaker will inevitably have to be selective but two contrasting periods might be considered. The need to discern our times. What is the relationship between periods of spiritual awakening and persecution?*

This is a complicated brief. It requires me to fill in some blanks for the sake of completeness, between Augustine and today. So there we have 1600 years or so of church history which I have to cover somehow. The phrase "the speaker will inevitably have to be selective" never looked so superfluous.

Then, I am asked to find certain periods within that gigantic swathe of history when the church has been "on the ascendancy in the culture". How do we define what that means? What is ascendancy, and what is culture? Are we talking about spiritual revival with myriads

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of conversions, or about political and cultural infiltration – by the gospel, by the Bible, or by the church? And which culture do we choose – England, Britain, Europe, or what?

Then, the brief calls for a look at some times of persecution too. If we take 2 Timothy 3:12 at face value – that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” – then every period of history has been and will be a period of persecution in one way or another. The problem of selectivity starts to become acute, even before we consider the necessity to contrast the ascendancy with the persecution.

Then the brief calls for a discussion of “the need to discern our times”. So, relating some of these things to today, perhaps helping us to see patterns in history which are being repeated in our generation, so that we can learn the fabled “lessons of history”?

History never precisely replicates itself, and so we cannot pretend that the past is an infallible guide to the future. The historian G. M. Trevelyan (1876-1962) once wrote that

“History repeats itself” and “History never repeats itself” are about equally true. The question, in any case, is which part of history is going to repeat itself. We never know enough about the infinitely complex circumstances of any past event to prophesy the future by analogy.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there may also be wisdom in the famous rejoinder that those who forget the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes; sometimes there are certain patterns in history which do reoccur simply because humanity in all its sinfulness has remained the same (and so has God).

Broadly speaking, Christians have always written church history as a way of promoting the claims of the church to be an ancient religion (not a recent innovation), the true religion (as opposed to the teachings of heretics), and (through martyrologies) a religion worth suffering for. The Reformation sent confessional historians of all types back to the sources looking for signs of religious continuity, while the Enlightenment encouraged them to write without reference to God as an agent in the whole affair.<sup>4</sup> So we have to think when we’re doing this sort of historical investigation, what our motivation or bias or agenda might be, and how that might be skewing our approach to the evidence or our criteria for selection.

Finally, I am required to answer an overarching question which impinges on philosophy, history, and all the sub-disciplines of theology: “What is the relationship between periods of

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<sup>3</sup> See his essay on “Stray Thoughts on History” (1948) in *An Autobiography and Other Essays* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1949), 84.

<sup>4</sup> See Lee Gatiss, “Christian History / Church History” in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Education* edited by G. T. Kurian and M. A. Lamport (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), Volume 1, 268-269.

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spiritual awakening and persecution?” Assuming there is such a relationship, which could in itself be rather tendentious.

All this is in the context of a conference where we are considering the hostility of the world to Christianity, a situation where government and media are apparently “seeking to eradicate Christian influence”, and where Christians therefore struggle with the temptation to ghettoise. How can we be faithful when the moral order around us changes, and is inimical to the gospel?

Needless to say, I am entirely inadequate to this task and have wondered many, many times why I agreed to bite off so much more than I could ever chew, let alone digest and communicate.

This is certainly an epic task, or a Herculean labour if I may be allowed a classical allusion. And according to the Roman poet, Horace, a good epic narrator should start *in medias res*, in the middle of things.<sup>5</sup> So I will jump in a little over half way through my 1600 years, to the 14th century.

We will then zoom in on the Reformation, and think about the nexus of issues in my brief from the point of view of how they worked out in the 16th and 17th centuries. Do I need more of an excuse than that it is the 500th anniversary of Luther’s stand against indulgences which catalysed the Reformation, to focus our attentions there? Yet the events of those centuries are formative for our self-understanding as Protestants and Evangelicals, and so I expect us to find there some crucial questions and resources as we think through the issues of our conference.

## The Middle Ages

Many people would see what we call the Middle Ages as a period of ascendancy for the church. Churches and cathedrals were constructed all over Europe, with universities and colleges built on explicitly Christian principles established in their wake to teach a Christian view of the universe (as opposed to the conflicting philosophies of multi-verses!). The church year dominated everyday life, with its regular rhythm of feasts, fasts, and festivals. Europe was not Islamic. It was no longer officially pagan. It was recognisably and intentionally Christian.

Yet in the 14th century, the great reformer John Wycliffe said, “I am certain indeed, that the truth of the gospel can, for a time, stumble in the streets and be silenced somewhat... but it

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<sup>5</sup> Horace (65 BC-8 BC) alluded to this exciting narrative device in Homer’s work, in his *Ars Poetica*, lines 147–149.

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cannot be extinguished.”<sup>6</sup> He recognised that, despite the Judaeo-Christian underpinnings of society in his day, the gospel itself was not always in the ascendancy. In the streets, in the public realm, it could stumble and be silenced, and though he was confident of its ultimate triumph, he knew that the fortunes of the gospel (if I may put it like that) could ebb and flow depending on other factors.

Now many church history courses, books, and lectures only ever cover the late medieval church as a prelude to the Reformation which transformed it. But of course it is good to remember that the thousand years before Luther was not a period of uniform light or homogenous darkness.

The subject of the medieval church has become a battleground for those who have very differing accounts of what that Reformation did, of course, and whether it should be viewed as “a good thing”. The traditional view was one of ignorance, corruption, and growing anti-clericalism replaced by the re-discovered gospel, vernacular Bibles and liturgies, and increased lay devotion. This has been challenged in recent years by (amongst others) Eamon Duffy, whose *Stripping of the Altars* painted a picture of a vibrant and beloved church unjustly attacked and denuded by Henry VIII and his Protestant successors.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, G. W. Bernard undertook a searching examination of the late medieval church on its own terms, rather than just as a backdrop to something that came later.<sup>8</sup> After all, as the famous German historian Leopold von Ranke said, historians should tell things like they were,<sup>9</sup> and every epoch is immediate to God; every age can therefore be studied in its own right and not as something which *led* to something else.<sup>10</sup>

Bernard begins his counter-blast by claiming that much of the recent writing on this period, particularly of the Duffy “school”, does not tell the full story, and indeed leaves the subsequent Reformation “inexplicable.” Yes, there was vitality in the church of the Middle Ages, but within that there were serious and substantial vulnerabilities which have been

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen E. Lahey (ed.), *Wyclif: Trialogus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 206.

<sup>7</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (Second edition; London: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> G. W. Bernard, *The Late Medieval English Church: Vitality and Vulnerability before the Break with Rome* (London: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Leopold von Ranke’s first major work was his *History of the Latin and Teutonic nations, 1494-1535* (published in 1824) where he famously claimed that as a historian he aspired to “show what actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). Whether he quite meant this in the reductionistic way some have taken it, is a controverted point. He probably meant that he wanted to discover the inner essence of events or perhaps even the divine hand behind them. See R.J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997), 17.

<sup>10</sup> By saying *jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott*, “every age is immediate / present to God”, von Ranke rejects the teleological approach to history and gives each moment of time a unique importance regardless of what may have developed from it later. See his *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte. Vorträge dem Könige Maximilian II. von Bayern im Herbst 1854 zu Berchtesgaden gehalten. Vortrag vom 25. September 1854*. in *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* (München: Helmut Berding, 1971), S. 60.

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ignored or played down. That is not to make the break with Rome and the eventual triumph of what the Coronation Oath calls “the true profession of the gospel... the Protestant Reformed religion” an absolute inevitability. Yet Bernard places provocative question marks over the revisionist accounts of late, and allows us to ask again what the proper criteria for judging the late medieval church should really be.

Bernard’s unfolding of the intricacies of “the monarchical church” of the middle ages – how kings controlled episcopal appointments and were both defenders of the church and extenders of the Christian faith – is deft and persuasive, and shows how the acceptance of royal supremacy under Henry VIII was by no means an untidy break with the past.

He assesses the role of bishops and clergy in the period, finding the former, for example, to be adequate administrators (“they muddled through”),<sup>11</sup> but too deeply enmeshed in worldly politics to be of much spiritual good. One of the greatest vulnerabilities for the church in this period was the population’s ignorance of the Christian message: yes, they had sculpture and stained glass, a liturgical calendar and pilgrimages. Their whole lives were ordered in many ways around the Church and the calendarised remembrance of Jesus’s life story. But the form of faith this perhaps engendered was wide open to humanist and Protestant critiques. Indeed, he rather dismisses medieval religion by saying it consisted of “an underlying pagan-cum-magical religious understanding upon which christianity [sic] had more or less been superimposed.”<sup>12</sup>

This is, therefore, a salutary response to an overly-positive assessment of the medieval period.<sup>13</sup> And it also shows us that there were both continuities and discontinuities between the medieval and Reformation eras.

Yet that point of Bernard’s is one we must come back to. A Christian-based society, like that of the Middle Ages, may look alive and dynamic and *vital* – but is it also *vulnerable* to another form of *explicitly Christian* critique, or even in some way just a veneer for a more carnal agenda? And how do we tell the difference or make a judgment between types of Christian society?

## The Reformation Settlement

This is the problem we are faced with in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, when thinking about the issues of Christianity and culture: one Christian form of religio-political establishment was overcome by another regime also built on Christian principles of one sort

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard, *Late Medieval English Church*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard, *Late Medieval English Church*, 107.

<sup>13</sup> See my review of Bernard’s book in *Theology* 116/5 (September 2013).

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or another – making it difficult from our more secular and post-Enlightenment standpoint many centuries later to understand sometimes what all the fuss was about.

For example, if we could return to a society where the family was more valued as a building block of civil society, where Sundays were not a time for shopping or working but going to church and resting from worldly pursuits, where sex outside of heterosexual marriage was considered a sin and even a crime, not something to be paraded with pride through the streets, where abortion or infanticide was viewed with horror rather than as a right or a way to make a living, and where Reformed Christianity was honoured as the national creed – I suspect we would think now of such a world as almost fantastical. And we would think it highly desirable if it was possible to move from where we are now, to such a world.

Yet that is the world that existed under Henry VIII, under Edward VI, under Elizabeth I, under James I, under Charles I, during the so-called Interregnum, and under Charles II. And yet, as you know, the religious settlement in each of these regimes was different. The truth of the gospel was in some sense “on the ascendancy in the culture” throughout that whole period, but it could look a little different in each reign.

But there was a substantial doctrinal core to the religious settlement during those days. When the high point of the Reformation came in 1689 – and even Baptists and Presbyterians were officially tolerated – it was under the banner of a Reformed Christianity. William and Mary swore to uphold “the true profession of the gospel... the Protestant Reformed religion”. That was the basis of the Act of Toleration. Not just Christianity. Not the Catholic religion or the Lutheran religion. But the Protestant *Reformed* religion, as defined by the Dutch Calvinist king – who subscribed to the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt – but also by the Anglican Queen under the Thirty-nine Articles who was also Queen of Scotland and her established church under the Westminster Standards.<sup>14</sup> This was Protestant and Reformed religion, the true profession of the gospel.

Toleration was granted in 1689 to those who could subscribe to at least thirty-six of the *Thirty-nine Articles*, those only excepted which dealt with issues of church polity and traditions.<sup>15</sup> So the official legal form of national religion throughout the mid-Tudor and

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<sup>14</sup> See my discussion of the Coronation Oath of William and Mary in Lee Gatiss, *The True Profession of the Gospel: Augustus Toplady and Reclaiming our Reformed Foundations* (London: Latimer Trust, 2009), 27-28.

<sup>15</sup> The Toleration Act, 1689 (1 William III and Mary II, c.18) section 6 allowed toleration of non-Anglican churches on the basis that their ministers subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles with the exception of Article 34 (‘On the Traditions of the Church’), Article 35 (‘Of Homilies’), Article 36 (‘Of Consecration of Bishops and Ministers’), and the first sentence of Article 20 (‘The Church hath power to decree Rites and Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith.’) This is essentially what the Puritans had tried to achieve in 1571 with *An Act to reform certain disorders touching Ministers of the Church* (13 Eliz. c.12) which prescribed assent ‘to all the articles of religion, which only concern the confession of the true Christian faith and the doctrine of the sacraments.’

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Stuart reigns, was substantially the same. All the arguments really came down between 1563 and 1689 was three or four of the less purely doctrinal of the Thirty-nine Articles.

Yet you know as well as I – since it is part of the DNA of our different denominations and groupings – that there were some fiery disagreements over those points of difference within that settlement. They weren't unimportant. But neither was the wide arena of agreement something insubstantial.

So what does it mean to talk about Christianity “on the ascendancy” at this time? Even someone like John Owen (1616-1683) – the Atlas of Independency, who seemed to be fighting to change things in the church his whole life – was happy with the doctrinal content of the established religion in the Church of England.<sup>16</sup>

Owen (like his father) called himself a Puritan because he was not in favour of some aspects of the church's governance and ceremonies. He eventually preferred congregational governance to episcopacy and wrote against the imposition of liturgies (though not against the use of liturgy *per se*). But doctrinally he always claimed to be entirely in accord with the confessional basis of Anglicanism, as it had been established by Parliament. As his latest biographer tells us, “It is unlikely that Owen had any difficulty with the doctrinal content of the articles: his publications in the 1640s would enthusiastically endorse the Thirty-nine Articles as being entirely opposed to the new Arminian menace.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, even in 1669 he could write that “the chief glory of the English Reformation consisted in the purity of its doctrine, then first restored to the nation. This, as it is expressed in the articles of religion, and in the publicly-authorized writings of the bishops and chief divines of the church of England, is, as was said, the glory of the English Reformation.”<sup>18</sup>

Rather than focusing on aesthetics or adiaphora, if we ask what Owen believed in terms of basic doctrine, we can point to the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*. As he himself says of those Articles, “What is purely doctrinal we fully embrace and constantly adhere unto.”<sup>19</sup> Even after 1662 he was happy to say, “I embrace the doctrine of the church of England, as declared in the Thirty-nine Articles, and other approved public writings of the most famous bishops and other divines thereof.”<sup>20</sup> That is tighter than the current form of subscription required of ministers in the Church of England!

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<sup>16</sup> My analysis of Owen's basic contentment with doctrinal Anglicanism comes from my article, “Anglicanism and John Owen” in *Crux* 52.1 (2016) and my *John Owen: The Genius of English Puritanism* (London: Lost Coin, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (New York: OUP, 2016), 35.

<sup>18</sup> W. H. Goold (ed.), *The Works of John Owen* (24 vols. Edinburgh: Johnson and Hunter, 1850-1855), 13:354.

<sup>19</sup> *Works*, 13:551.

<sup>20</sup> *Works*, 14:196.

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It is of course true that Owen would have had a political motive in affirming that he still held to the long-standing Reformed consensus of the church. He no doubt meant to shame those in the post-Restoration church who did not hold sincerely to those Articles (and who were at that time actively persecuting dissenters such as Owen by means of the so-called Clarendon Code). He could also imply that though they were now excluded and penalised by the iniquitous Conventicle Act and Five Mile Act, he and other nonconformists had not moved away from the teaching officially confessed by the Church for over a century by that time. Indeed, from his first book in the 1640s onwards, he was perfectly capable of attacking the established church while simultaneously defending its constitution. Owen was not forced to embrace and publicly affirm this as he did; but it remained his consistent doctrinal stance, for he always refused to cede legitimacy to those theological cuckoos who had invaded the Church of England's nest.

So it is worth remembering that when toleration of dissenters did come with the Act of Toleration (1689), it was indeed on the basis of what Owen embraced as “the common doctrine of the Church of England”,<sup>21</sup> i.e. the doctrinal parts of the *Thirty-nine Articles*. It was not on the basis of what some called “mere Christianity” (a term that was popularised in the twentieth century by C. S. Lewis, but certainly not invented by him). That is what some would have liked to be the basis of our national creed. In December 1654, Parliament specifically and deliberately agreed that, “the true reformed Protestant Religion” should be “the public profession of these nations”.<sup>22</sup> Richard Baxter, however, had a different idea, and he pushed it in committee at the time. Baxter liked to call himself a “meer Christian” and tried to promote the Bible and the Apostles’ Creed as sufficient tests for orthodoxy (sometimes adding the Lord’s Prayer and Ten Commandments as additional touchstones). At least as early as 1659 he used the term “meer Christians”<sup>23</sup> and this became one of his regular slogans in later years, so that in 1680 he could write,

I am a CHRISTIAN, a MEER CHRISTIAN, of no other Religion; and the Church that I am of is the Christian Church... I am against all Sects and dividing Parties: But if any will call *Meer Christians* by the name of a *Party*, because they take up with *Meer Christianity, Creed, and Scripture*, and will not be of any dividing or contentious Sect, I am of that Party which is so against Parties.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Works*, 13:552.

<sup>22</sup> J. Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in Seventeenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 243.

<sup>23</sup> R. Baxter, *Five Disputations of Church-Government and Worship* (1659), 137.

<sup>24</sup> R. Baxter, *Church-History of the Government of Bishops and their Councils* (1680), in the section entitled, ‘What History is Credible?’ See the use of ‘meer Christian/Christianity’ in his *Christian Directory, or, A Summ of Practical Theologie and Cases of Conscience* (1673), page 31; *Which is the True Church?* (1679), page 125; *An Apology for the Nonconformists Ministry* (1681), page 131 (mostly written 1668–9); *A Paraphrase on the New Testament* (1685) on Revelation 13:18.

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Indeed, one might say of Baxter's autobiography that "his attraction to 'meer Christianity' functions as an organising principle throughout his narrative and colours the way he sees and describes events."<sup>25</sup> Both the slogan and this approach to ecclesiology were, however, held in common with some other groups, including anti-Trinitarians. Most prominently, Unitarian author John Biddle had claimed in the title that his *Twofold Catechism* (1654) was "Composed for their sakes that would fain be meer Christians, and not of this or that sect." This sounded suspiciously like Baxter's approach, and Owen and others noted the close connection at the time. But it didn't bother Baxter when they said that even a Socinian could sign up to his mere Christianity approach.

And whereas they still said, [*A Socinian or a Papist will Subscribe all this*] I answered them, So much the better, and so much the fitter it is to be the Matter of our Concord.<sup>26</sup>

So, what I am saying is that from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, we have had a more or less stable *doctrinal* core in our public, established profession of faith: the Protestant Reformed religion. That was in the ascendancy in our national life, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

But how did that apply to the culture and morality of the day? And how did it affect others who were out of power for certain periods, and persecuted? Those two questions remain.

### Puritan Culture Wars

The period between 1649 when Charles I was beheaded, and 1660 when his son was restored to the throne, has been fittingly described as the period of *England's Culture Wars*, by Bernard Capp.<sup>27</sup> He describes with agonising detail the implementation of the Puritans' agenda for moral and cultural reform during the period of the Interregnum.

Cromwell pursued reforms not just in the parishes, with learned ministers preaching sound doctrine and living good lives of exemplary character. They tore through the old-fashioned Christian calendar, banning things such as Ash Wednesday and Lent and Easter – even Christmas.<sup>28</sup> They were never entirely successful at replacing these with days of fasting or thanksgiving, or in making Christmas Day an ordinary working day in England. But they tried

<sup>25</sup> Lee Gatiss, 'The Autobiography of a 'Meer Christian': Richard Baxter's Account of the Restoration' in *Churchman* 122/2 (2008), 169.

<sup>26</sup> Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696), ii.198. For more on this see my article, "Socinianism and John Owen" in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20.4 (2016).

<sup>27</sup> See Bernard Capp, *England's Culture Wars: Puritan Reformation and its Enemies in the Interregnum, 1649-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Durston, "Puritan Rule and the Failure of Cultural Revolution, 1645-1660", in Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales, *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560-1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 211-212.

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to reverse a millennium of Christian rhythms to the year, which had been used to educate generations about the foundational events of the Christian story. Yet governments during this period also put in place a series of legislative reforms to do with the Sabbath and swearing, sexual misdemeanours and crimes, drink and disorderly conduct, and various worldly pleasures such as dancing, plays and sports.

It is sometimes joked that the Puritans banned bull baiting, not because they cared for the bulls but because they didn't like the fact that the people enjoyed baiting them so much – fun must be controlled and regulated! That may be half true – they were motivated not just by concern for animal welfare as by issues of public order, and bull baiting was an unruly and riotous pastime. Similarly, they banned horse racing from time to time, but this was less about a hatred of the sport and more about not giving royalist cavaliers a good place to assemble and gather in large numbers with their horses.<sup>29</sup> Wagers and betting were also outlawed, out of concern for citizens' livelihood and morality.<sup>30</sup>

It is too easy to caricature the Puritans, of course. Some critiques, taking contemporary satire and polemic at face value, make out that Puritanism was some deviant and pernicious sub-culture, when in actual fact it mostly promoted mainstream Protestant piety.<sup>31</sup> It has always been easy to dislike Puritans, and “a sense of being despised and hated by the impious and unregenerate was a vital element in Puritan identity”.<sup>32</sup> Yet even their cheerleaders find it hard to defend the Puritans' inadequate view of recreation, their multiplication of rules, their pious moralising, male chauvinism, and partisan spirit.<sup>33</sup>

Bernard Capp concludes of the Puritans legislative agenda that “their law-making was no fanatical aberration; their new measures were consciously building on the acts and initiatives of earlier parliaments”.<sup>34</sup> For example, they toyed with repeal of the Elizabethan statute requiring attendance at the local parish church, so as to allow people to go wherever they wanted on Sunday to worship. But they found eventually that they did not want to encourage atheism and sloth on the Sabbath, so it was again reintroduced, in an amended form.

The 1650 Adultery Act was perhaps the most notorious piece of legislation in this period – making adultery a felony punishable by death, with incest made a felony too and fornication

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<sup>29</sup> Capp, *England's Culture Wars*, 207-208.

<sup>30</sup> Durston, “Puritan Rule and the Failure of Cultural Revolution, 1645-1660”, 218.

<sup>31</sup> See Patrick Collinson, “The Theatre Constructs Puritanism” in D. Smith, D. Bevington, and R. Strier (eds.), *The Theatrical City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and his “Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Invention of Puritanism” in J. Guy (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Alexandra Walsham, “The Godly and Popular Culture” in John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 290.

<sup>33</sup> See Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 187-202.

<sup>34</sup> Capp, *England's Culture Wars*, 31.

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liable to a prison sentence of 3 months. Prostitutes were to be whipped, pilloried, branded, and imprisoned for 3 years. This is how they sought to regulate the sex lives of the nation. Indeed, Anthony Fletcher says these years saw “the most sustained magisterial effort of the century to... impose a sexual code based on the Christian doctrine of chastity outside marriage.”<sup>35</sup>

They also tried to regulate marriage. They banned all church weddings for several years, so that the only legal weddings were civil weddings. Then they thought better of this and again allowed religious ceremonies. But the rules and changes caused massive confusion which would lead to headaches for the Restoration regime.<sup>36</sup>

If today someone spent the morning in church and then went for a walk with their children in the afternoon, we might consider them a godly family, worthy of emulation. To many Puritans, this would be an outrageous misuse of the Sabbath for leisure. Obviously all sport was out on the Sabbath day, and royal proclamations such as those of James I and Charles I in their “Book of Sports” which encouraged such leisure activities, were considered by the Puritans as “a royal endorsement of sin.”<sup>37</sup> Work, travel, drinking, dancing and sports were all prohibited on Interregnum Sabbaths, with fines and worse for those who offended against this Keep Sunday Special campaign.

Unfortunately some of these measures led to a culture of informers and spying on others to catch them out in their personal lives, for financial reward. As Capp says, “Godly reformation sometimes relied on very ungodly instruments.”<sup>38</sup>

Throughout this period, the church remained tightly under state control. Even independents such as John Owen, argued for state control of the church, whose ministry should be maintained by compulsory tithes and regulated by a committee of Parliament. Owen also thought that the State had a duty to stop anti-Trinitarians infiltrating the church, and to silence those who rejected justification by faith alone.<sup>39</sup> The magistrates could enforce that, in his view; indeed it was against the light and law of nature, he said, for supreme magistrates not to exert their authority to support, preserve, and further the cause of the gospel and forbid, coerce, and restrain false teaching.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Anthony Fletcher, *Reform in the Provinces: The Government of Stuart England* (London: Yale University Press, 1986), 260.

<sup>36</sup> Durston, “Puritan Rule and the Failure of Cultural Revolution, 1645-1660”, 215-217.

<sup>37</sup> Capp, *England's Culture Wars*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Capp, *England's Culture Wars*, 107.

<sup>39</sup> The most recent published demonstration of this can be found in Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pages 205-232. See also the excellent Martyn Cowan, *The Prophetic Preaching of John Owen from 1646 to 1659 in its Historical Context* (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2012), 134.

<sup>40</sup> See for example Owen, *Works*, 13:509-510.

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In one way, some of these reforms look very strange to us. In trying to make a more Christian society, they withdrew the church from national life: in the calendar reforms, in marriage, and in the secularisation and simplification of death rituals too. In others ways it seems odd to many today that they retained such firm state control over the appointment of ministers and the regulation of the church. But that is the point: what might look like a good tactic for Christian influence in one age, might be considered ungodly and unhelpful by another. What one generation of Christians would say to another generation of Christians on Twitter (if they had had such a thing) can only be imagined! Yet each was trying to do its best to shape the church and society of its day according to a particular Christian vision, in complex and often fragile circumstances.

### Protestants Persecuting Protestants (and others)

Elizabeth I tried to root out dissenters of various kinds by making it compulsory to go to the local parish church on Sunday. Anyone who did not, was fined. This flushed out, and fleeced, two main types of nonconformist: Brownists and Roman Catholics. The Brownists were separatists, who wanted to keep themselves pure from what they considered the corrupt worship of the Church of England. There were never a large number of these, and many ended up leaving the country. There was no sense, yet, that it was possible to be an obedient subject of the Queen and not worship in the same Church as the Queen, using the same Prayer Book. So many centuries of official conformity in public worship had had such a deep and long-lasting impact on the church and the national psyche, that it is difficult for us to imagine, in our denominationally rich days, the powerful tendencies towards uniformity. And so Protestants could persecute protestants and it did not feel wrong.

The other group exposed by making church attendance compulsory were the Roman Catholics. But theirs was not merely a religious problem. When the Pope excommunicated Elizabeth and pronounced her – in effect – a bastard heretic, he instantly made the entire Catholic population of England into terrorist suspects. For the Pope promised an indulgence for anyone who would kill her, that she might be replaced by a rightful Catholic heir to Mary I. This risky move by the Papacy led to the deaths of many Roman Catholics – often killed not so much for their faith alone (which was still nonetheless officially suppressed) as for their seditious activities in plotting to overthrow the Queen. There was suppression of Roman Christianity in often heavy-handed ways, by a Protestant Christian Queen.

James I did not see eye-to-eye with the more Puritan factions in his court and in the church, and refused to grant some of their early petitions for reform. They were not persecuted as such, however, merely frustrated in some of their reforming aims as they had been in the second half of Elizabeth's reign too. James sent delegates to the Synod of Dort in 1618, closely identifying Britain with the international Reformed community. Catholicism remained suppressed.

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Under Charles I, however, things began to change. Urged on by Archbishop William Laud and avant-garde ceremonialist and Arminian courtiers, he plunged the country into a much fiercer internecine battle. Together, they tried to swing the Church away from the Reformed Protestant consensus and, if not towards reunion with Rome, then on a Romanising trajectory. This broke the brotherly bonds which had kept various factions in church and state together since the Reformation and eventually led – with some other economic and political factors – to many Puritans emigrating to the New World and to the civil wars. Broadly speaking, the Puritans came out on top in that military confrontation.<sup>41</sup>

The Puritan revolution began in earnest by banning bishops, and *The Book of Common Prayer*. This was suppressed at times with needlessly strong force. Laud paid for his persecution of Puritans with his life – losing his head on Tower Hill in 1645. The King's head followed four years later. Unless you were a Catholic or a Prayer Book Anglican, almost everything else was tolerated in some way under the Commonwealth, though there were arguments about exactly how far that toleration should spread. Lots of undesirables who disagreed with these policies were kicked out of their rectories and colleges and schools, and replaced with good Puritan folk. No doubt many who lost their livings at this point were scandalous and malignant and immoral. But not all were. The Puritans managed to persecute and suppress others, just as effectively as previous regimes.

In 1660, the monarchy was restored. So were lots of those who had been unceremoniously kicked out of their vicarages and college rooms. There were at least fifty Baptists ministering in local parish churches. They had to leave, as did others who had been forced into place by the Puritans. But at this stage there was still the prospect that these people could go on to take other posts elsewhere, and many of them did.

It was only in 1662 and the Act of Uniformity that things became much more difficult. Hundreds of ministers, lecturers, and schoolteachers were ejected from their livings because they could not, or would not, subscribe to the Act of Uniformity and use the Book of Common Prayer attached to it. This required a more severe form of subscription than had previously been imposed, and required people to renounce solemn oaths they had taken during the Commonwealth period, which of, course, many felt they could not do.

Other laws were then also put in place against dissenters, barring them from civic roles on councils and in Parliament, forcing them to live at least five miles away from anywhere they had ever ministered before, and banning them from holding “conventicles” in public or in private.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This is of course a gross oversimplification (though also a useful shorthand), not least because Puritanism was a diverse phenomenon containing “Episcopalians”, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and other shades of opinion. Also, it might be said that the Puritans lost the war, if the end of the conflict is dated 1662 instead of 1649, though they won some major battles.

<sup>42</sup> For more on this terrible episode, see my *The Tragedy of 1662: The Ejection and Persecution of the Puritans* (London: Latimer Trust, 2007).

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Enforcement of the penal laws against dissenters was never as rigid as it might have been, and varied from place to place and from time to time depending on the attitude of local officials. Even so, more than two hundred of the ejected ministers ended up in jail, along with countless lay people.<sup>43</sup> Andrew Marvell famously described the Second (more rigidly enforced) Conventicles Act as “the Quintessence of arbitrary Malice”. What was clear is that (as John Coffey says),

Anglican persecutors could now appeal to “a formidable legal arsenal which, potentially, made possible a Puritan holocaust.” Although the worst possibilities were never realised, the Restoration did witness a persecution of Protestants by protestants without parallel in seventeenth-century Europe.<sup>44</sup>

It is a wonder that more did not emigrate to America, as many had done in the 1630s.<sup>45</sup>

Despite several attempts, even by the King, to mitigate the effects of this official persecution and suppression, it lasted (with a short but unconstitutional respite in 1672) until the end of Charles II’s reign. Only then did the various elements of Protestantism within Britain come together again – to resist the spectre of a renewed Catholicism under James II. When he was replaced in the coup of 1688 by his daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange, the time was ripe for a settlement which would end the Protestant on Protestant persecution. It did not, however, bring about the emancipation of Catholics or freedom of religion in general. But it did solidify that Reformed Protestant umbrella under which the United Kingdom entered the great period of expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries.

## Conclusion

Someone once said, “we read to know we’re not alone”. That is certainly one good motive for reading church history. As we unwind all the tangled threads of cultural, social, and economic context, the story of the great political and theological battles of the past enables us to glimpse just a little that we are not the first or only generation to face such pressing anxieties and questions.

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<sup>43</sup> J. Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689* (London: Longman, 2000), 70. Jail was not always as bad as it might have been. Although some did die in prison, Baxter’s time in jail in 1670 was not so unhappy and, he says, “my Wife was never so cheerful a Companion to me as in Prison, and *was very much against my seeking to be released.*” *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Part III, p. 50 (my italics). Coffey quotes Terry Waite comparing his own confinement to Bunyan’s with these words: “My word, Bunyan, you’re a lucky fellow”! (*op.cit.* 175).

<sup>44</sup> Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, page 169 quoting M. Goldie, “The search for religious liberty, 1640-1690”, in J. Morrill, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Tudor and Stuart Britain* (Oxford, 1996), 300.

<sup>45</sup> Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, page 177 claims that only fifteen ministers crossed the Atlantic and just ten settled in the Netherlands. See Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), xiv.

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What this brief and inadequate historical survey shows clearly, however, is that when we reach the shores of a better land there will be many there to greet us who bear the scars of similar battles, valiantly fought in the name of Christ – who also made mistakes like we do. What can we learn by reading history, and facing the challenges of our day with them beside us?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What do the reactions to the Prime Minister's speech show us about the perennial questions and problems of perception facing Christians who want to influence society?
2. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the medieval church in terms of influencing the cultures of the day?
3. How strong is the Reformed Protestant religion as the established creed of the United Kingdom today?
4. Would "mere Christianity" have been a better basis for the religious settlement in the 1650s onwards? Why/why not?
5. Why is it that some Christians always end up being persecuted or alienated and marginalised when other Christians are in power?
6. Would you repeat all the reforms of the Puritans in 1650, in the ways that they implemented them? If not, why not?