Reformation Unbound: Protestant Visions of Reform in England, 1525–1590

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Gunther's detailed and persuasive study traces the development of radical Protestant thought in England through the mid and late 16th century. His work is a corrective to views that the tensions marking Puritanism and those holding more radical views of the church with those who supported the established church, came about only with the rise of the Puritan movement. Instead, Gunther argues that 'these tensions – along with radical visions of "further" reformation and godly life in the world – had been part of the English Reformation from its very beginnings' (p. 253).

This historical work is significant. As Gunther points out, views of the English reformers as aiming for a *via media* between Roman Catholicism and emerging Protestantism have been disproved. Scholars now recognize the 'deep interconnections' between English leaders and continental church reformers. The earliest English evangelicals were identified with Lutheranism and then, 'especially from the reign of Edward VI onward, with a full-blooded Reformed theology that would forge a "Calvinist consensus" in the Elizabethan Church' (p. 5). But while attention has been focused on evangelicals who had moderate leanings toward church reforms, not enough consideration has been given to those who developed radical visions. These are 'typically treated as later developments in the course of the English Reformation' (p. 6). Instead, says Gunther, 'calls for a revolutionary restructuring of the church's government, offices, and functions according to biblical guidelines did not await the coming of the Presbyterians in the 1570s, but had been issued by evangelicals in the late 1520s and 1530s' (p. 254). Issues of biblical authority, royal authority, and what is *adiaphora* were in play. These, along with who should regulate such things emerged early and were the beginnings from which formed, in Patrick Collinson's words, 'the geological fault-line between Anglicanism and Nonconformity, Church and Chapel' (p. 253). These ecclesiological elements developed throughout the period so that 'true worship' could be established. Gunther's book helps us see how more radical ideas about the 'further reformation' of the church and the nature of godly life that developed during Elizabeth's reign should be seen 'not as fundamentally new departures within English Protestantism, but as the continuation (and in some cases) the reappearance of ideas and tensions that had been developing within the English Reformation from its start' (p. 9).

Gunther begins by surveying visions for a reformed church which developed during the reign of Henry VIII. Early English Protestant priorities during Henry's reign supported his break with Rome. But many Henrician evangelicals were also deeply concerned with reforming the church's government and discipline and called for wholesale changes in these areas. Printed texts of the 1520s and 1530s from William Tyndale and Robert Barnes as well as translated works of Luther, Wolfgang Capito, and François Lambert urged a church with a lean ecclesiastical structure featuring only bishops (reenvisioned as parish ministers) and deacons (p. 18). In Tyndale's model of church government, 'there was no place for hierarchy' (p. 27).

While Henry's regime supported its actions in rejecting papal supremacy by official doctrinal statements such as the *King's Book* (1543), the monarch would not go further to abolish clerical hierarchy itself (p. 45). So for the newly-formed Church of England, Henry pretty much maintained the polity and governance of the medieval church. But later Presbyterians were not, as Gunther indicates, 'the first English Protestants to call for an end to diocesan episcopacy and ecclesiastical courts, or to demand the equality of ministers and the complete withdrawal of the clergy from secular affairs' (p. 62).

The early decades of the English Reformation did not bring unanimity of views. Divisions within the nation became polarizing, while Christians, including the King, also believed that reformation should eradicate religious division. The king argued that the Pope was the source of contentions and strife in England and that the royal reformation would bring peace. The Act of Supremacy (1534) made Henry the head of the Church of England for 'the conservation of the peace, unity and tranquility of this realm' (p. 66).

But some evangelicals viewed the Christian life as one where persecution is inevitable. Commitment to the 'pure gospel' would certainly bring imprisonments, public humiliations, and exile and executions to those who maintained fidelity to Christ. Instead of peace, reformation would bring a 'sword'. William Tyndale, in commenting on Jesus' prescription for Christians to be the 'salt of the earth' taught that Christians should apply salt to 'their faith and beleffe' and this would lead them to be 'called a rayler, sedicious, a maker of discord and a troubeler of the comen peace, ye a scismatick and an hereticke also' (p. 69). Yet this salting is the duty of all Christians. It nearly demanded Christians to 'behave in ways that produced opposition' (p. 75). An 'absence of conflict signaled the absence of the gospel' (p. 79). As Gunther, notes, Hugh Latimer proclaimed that 'preaching that did *not* produce opposition was ipso facto popish' (p. 82). This militant view of the Christian life was 'a potent reminder of the violence that lurked within English Protestant thought from its very beginnings' (p. 95).

When Protestants went into exile under Queen Mary, new issues arose and questions about the nature of an English church remained pressing. For committed evangelicals who remained in England, pressures to affirm Roman Catholic doctrines and practices in which they did not believe, were strong. Some 'attempted "to negotiate their ways out of such demands"' (p. 98). Others became 'Nicodemites', a term used by John Calvin to characterize 'those who outwardly conformed to Catholicism while inwardly holding Protestant convictions' (p. 98). This became widespread among Marian Protestants, justified by a number of principled arguments.

But denunciation of Nicodemism was also strong. Calvin, in particular, denounced all forms of Nicodemism in toughest terms. Gunther shows that this strong anti-Nicodemite stream which stressed the demand to make an open and unambiguous confession of Jesus Christ 'played a central role in shaping the activism of the hotter sort of Protestants, not only when they faced overt persecution during Henry and Mary's reigns but also throughout the reign of Elizabeth' (pp. 99–100).

The Nicodemite dissimulation was regarded as so drastically dangerous because it was seen as putting one's eternal salvation at stake. Hypocrisy revealed one as a child of the devil. How persons responded to persecution for their faith was 'a key signal of their eternal destiny' (p. 102). The imprisoned John Bradford wrote to an unknown lady, praising God for giving her "'so bold a spret that yow are not ashamed of hys gospel, which is a playne token that yow be the very elect child of god'" (p. 102). Anti-Nicodemites urged

that there could be no compromise whatsoever with idolatry. When hypocrites attended ceremonies, they were proclaiming their ultimate allegiances. The Mass was an idol, said Calvin, endangering the souls of all who participated but also causing an 'offense' to 'weaker brethren', a practice prohibited by the apostle Paul.

After Mary's reign, those who did not repent of capitulations, were suspect and their offenses not forgotten. With the prospects of a Catholic restoration always a possibility, according to some, 'English Protestants needed to remain on something like anti-Nicodemite high alert, constantly preparing to resist the impending temptation to dissemble and submit to popery' (p. 116). Even under the Edwardian Reformation, many believed that idolatry had not been eradicated, but that 'it had survived in a new form', particularly in covetousness, for "every covetouse manne is an Idolator" because he worships riches instead of God', according to Thomas Lever (p. 123). The works of Job Throckmorton and John Udall provide 'perfect examples of the ongoing centrality of anti-Nicodemite habits of thought for puritans as they aspired to maintain a constant and unambiguous confession of Christ in Elizabethan England' (p. 129).

Mary's reign forced thoughtful Protestants to make difficult choices. But it also brought other issues to the fore, namely, a reevaluation of views about royal authority and what role the monarch should have in establishing true religion. As is well-known, some exiles during Mary's reign moved toward developing a theory of resistance in which open and decisive actions – even regicide – should be necessary responses. The writings of John Knox, John Ponet, and Christopher Goodman were leaders in this trajectory.

For those in England, the traditional view since the 1530s had been that the king and Parliament had the prerogative to set ecclesiastical policy and polity. The view was sanctioned in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1552): 'No man ought to take in hand, nor presume to appoynt or alter any publique or common order in Christes church, except he be lawfully called and authorized thereunto' (p. 132). During Mary's reign, the 'hotter sort' of Protestants had sought the advancement of true religion without the means of royal authority or the national church.

With Elizabeth's accession – the Queen being called Deborah, Esther, or a second Constantine – hopes were that idolatry would be abolished and true religion restored in the land. But Gunther argues that 'the accession of a Protestant queen did not necessarily lead to the abandonment of the more expansive conception of religious authority and godly activism that had taken hold during Mary's reign' (p. 133). Resistance theory continued to shape Protestant thought about religious reform.

James Pilkington's commentary on the Old Testament book of Haggai (1560) is explored by Gunther. Pilkington argued that not just the monarch but all the people were commanded in Haggai's time to rebuild the temple and, thus, all God's people in the present time were called to establish true religion, so that a 'Reformation without tarrying' for even the monarch should be the people's main concern. Pilkington criticized the failures of the English Reformation and the wholesale failure and guilt of the entire English population. For "'in England, al be gilty, al have bene punished, because every sort of men should have laid his helpynge hande to the buyldinge of Gods house, refourmyng his religion, restoring and maintaining hys gospel, which none or very few have earnestly done'" (p. 138). While the monarch's power may be great, it is not as great as God's. If the monarch resisted building the temple, the people's work in building should go on. England's history was paralleling ancient Israel's. As Gunther puts it, 'In Pilkington's version of post-exilic Israel – a place that was always explicitly or implicitly contemporary England – those who built God's temple might be wrongly accused of rebellion and treason, but they were doing God's work and he would reward them' (p. 140). Godly alliances began to be formed and by the 1570s, Separatists were seeking to complete the church's reformation 'without tarrying' for the magistrate. As William White argued in 1569, 'the people' did not need authorization in order to carry out God's commands (p. 155).

Gunther's story has drawn attention to radical ideas within Elizabethan Protestantism. He next sets to revise understandings that emerged as divisions within English Protestantism in the 1550s and 1560s over *adiaphora* – 'things indifferent'; and the need for ongoing, further reformation. Chapter five revisits the 'Troubles at Frankfurt' and chapter six considers 'Catholics and the Elizabethan vestments controversy'.

Gunther rejects the view of Daniel Neal and others that the well-known 'Troubles at Frankfurt' marked the beginning of the 'fatal division' (Neal; cf. Collinson) between 'those who sought to maintain the Edwardian liturgy and those who "resolved to shake off the remains of antichrist"' (p. 159). Gunther argues that the Troubles 'took place in a very different political and polemical context than the Elizabethan (or earlier Edwardian) debates over *adiaphora* and religious authority' (p. 160). This meant the principles at stake and the divisions that emerged at Frankfurt were also, basically, different. Gunther writes that 'a distinctively "conformist" position was absent among the exiles at Frankfurt and the views of ceremonies adopted was absent among the exiles at Frankfurt and the views of ceremonies adopted by *both* sides in the controversy would later be used by puritans to argue *against* the use of vestments and other traditional ceremonies in the Elizabethan Church' (p. 160). This means, says Gunther, that 'rather than foreshadowing the divide between puritans and conformists ... the positions staked out at Frankfurt are better seen as presaging the widespread commitment of the returning exiles to purge the Elizabethan Church of the "remnants of popery"' (p. 160).

The Frankfurt struggles between the Knoxians (John Knox) and Coxians (Richard Cox) led to the forced departure of the Knoxians who had argued against the use of the Prayer Book. But as Gunther points out, the Coxians 'did not adopt the "conformist" position on these issues, especially in the months after they wrested control away from Knox and Whittingham' (p. 176). After the departure, the Coxians did not reestablish the totality of the Prayer Book worship. They did, in fact, adopt many of the same changes the Knoxians had made. 'The Coxians', says Gunther, 'were ultimately willing to tolerate individual nonconformity within the Frankfurt congregation on ceremonial matters' (p. 177). They permitted scruples. The Coxians stressed that their modifications were on *adiaphora* and that 'they did so in a way that did not undermine either the Edwardian Reformation or their former ministry within it' (p. 178). In this regard, argues Gunther, 'accepting the existence of *adiaphora* did not make the Coxian proto-conformists' (p. 179).

The Troubles exposed fissures within English Protestantism. When the exiles returned to England and Elizabeth became Queen, 'the hagiographers of the 1560s did not dredge up the memory of the Troubles at Frankfurt in 1554-1555' (p. 182). The Troubles 'were conspicuously absent from the intra-Protestant polemics of the 1560s and early 1570s' (p. 183). Invoking the Troubles in the coming Vestments controversy would bring reminders and associations with Knox and Christopher Goodman, both of whom were developing resistance theories which led to 'Elizabeth's white-hot hatred of Knox and Goodman' (p. 184). Also, some leading figures such as William Whittingham and Anthony Gilby as well as former Coxians Thomas Lever and Thomas Sampson who were now critics of vestments in the 1560's had in the Frankfurt times, held the opposite position. All in all, 'when Protestants fought about "things indifferent" in the first decade of Elizabeth's reign ... the situation and the terms of the debate would be very different than they were in Frankfurt during 1554-1555' (p. 188).

The tensions between those who supported the Elizabethan Settlement (1559) and those who believed further reform of the church was necessary came to a head in the Elizabethan vestments controversy (1565-6). This controversy 'swirled around the legal requirement for the Church of England's ministers to wear a square cap and surplice, a white linen gown with drooping sleeves' (p. 189), which were garments traditionally worn by Roman Catholic clergy. To a number of English Protestants, these were 'popish rags'.

Gunther's chapter on Vestments highlights the otherwise nearly absent recognition that Roman Catholic voices were part of the controversy and that 'the first printed salvoes in the Elizabethan vestments controversy were not written by English Protestants, but by English Catholics' (p. 191). Catholic exiles in the Low Countries rose to meet the attack of John Jewel who challenged 'papists' to produce any single statement from Scripture, the early church theologians, or early church councils that supported Roman

Catholic doctrines. Some 60 or more texts by Roman Catholics were produced and were being read in England, throughout the country. This led to the famous exchange of Jewel with the Roman Catholic, Thomas Harding. Catholic polemics were a real problem for English Protestants and raised the anxiety level of the effects that prescribed vestments in the Church of England would have.

The word 'Puritan' was coined in this period, initially as a term of abuse for those who opposed vestments. At issue were whether vestments were *adiaphora* and whether the monarch had the power to command the use of *adiaphora*. While opponents saw vestments as unscriptural and too dangerously papist, supporters argued that '*adiaphora* like vestments were to be ordained by the magistrate for the sake of external order in the church, and their use was a matter of obedience to divinely appointed authorities' (p. 190). Archbishop Matthew Parker argued that "'oftentymes the Subject ought to obey in thynges not forbidden by God, and commanded by lawe, though he do not plainly perceive eyther for what good end they are required, or to what ende they wyll come: as dayly experience in common wealthes do shewe'" (pp. 209–10). Parker also believed that vestments could play an important role in the conversion of English Catholics.

Gunther's final chapter, 'The battle for English Protestantism' describes Puritan responses to the religious situation. Elizabethan Presbyterians and separatists sought church reforms based on their view that God was continuing to bring the elect out of popery and by the Holy Spirit, continuing to work in new ways in England. In this, they often sought to claim earlier reformers – such as Tyndale – for their own. The Marprelate Tracts, in seeking to establish a Presbyterian pedigree for reform, made it appear that 'Tyndale, Barnes, and Frith were practically presbyterians' (p. 233). Puritan views were challenged by those whose goal was 'to deprive the puritans of any claim to historical continuity with the early heroes of the English Reformation' (p. 248). Gunther proposes that through it all, this was 'the biggest question at stake between conformists and Presbyterians in Elizabethan England': 'Was the polity of the Elizabethan Church of England godly/Protestant or ungodly popish?' (p. 250). This was the question dividing the nation.

Gunther's splendid study clearly delineates the various Protestant visions of reform in England from 1525–90, correcting common and well-entrenched misapprehensions. He shows the ways in which controversies that divided the English church were longstanding throughout the English Reformation. In the emerging contexts of the times, these grew into smoldering disputes in which competing visions and voices contended in the Elizabethan battle for English Protestantism.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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