

The Christian Monitors: The Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680-1730

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Derived from a 2007 University of Chicago Ph.D. dissertation, this is an audacious debut.⁽¹⁾ In a challenging new take on the politics of English religious association during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Sirota presents a dynamic ‘Anglican revival’ which gave rise to ‘modern civil society in Britain’ (p. 260). The boldness of this claim is matched by the confidence of Yale University Press, who have solicited praise from no less than four esteemed colleagues to adorn the dust jacket.

The early signs are indeed promising. An assertive introduction makes clear that this book will not be preoccupied with the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Church of England, but rather a novel political history designed to ‘excavate the fault line between church and civil society in the decades surrounding the Revolution of 1688–1689’ (p. 13). Transcending debates about the causes and consequences of the Revolution, Sirota sets out to explore some of the broader historical contours of religio-political change and, in so doing, aims at synthesizing oppositional interpretations of ‘confessionalization’ and ‘secularization’ (pp. 11–12). Six well-constructed chapters follow. The first chapter makes a case for an ‘Anglican revival’ in the lead up to the Revolution of 1688–9. The second spots a ‘devolution of religious renewal’ over the course of the 1690s from the episcopate to more entrepreneurial clergy and laity (p. 91). The next three chapters chart a split in the method and ideals of ‘Anglican revival’. The third chapter argues that the early life of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) unwittingly championed a more irenic and benevolent church polity. The fourth considers how this move marginalized high-churchmen who envisaged ‘society’ as an externalization of sacramental, sacerdotal religion. The fifth takes this further by exploring the rise and fall of a ‘moral counter-revolution’ orchestrated by high-churchmen against the prevailing mood for voluntary association (p. 187). The last chapter shows how the type of ‘Anglican revival’ sponsored by the SPCK extended to the Colonies, and beyond, to make the ‘Established Church less dependent on the political, diocesan, and parochial structures that had proved difficult if not impossible to reproduce abroad’ (pp. 224–5). Sirota’s conclusion presses the point that the ‘Anglican revival’ was essentially ‘moral rather than confessional, associational rather than parochial, benevolent rather than sacramental’ and, as a result, created a new ‘space’ where individuals could be ‘improved, but not saved’ (p. 260).

Working from the premise that ‘Revolutionary Anglicanism cannot be grasped through the lens of political

theology', the first chapter suggests that 'Anglican revival' was 'the context for, rather than a consequence of, the Revolution of 1688–1689' (p. 24 and p. 25). For Sirota, 'the decade that followed the Anglican royalist rapprochement of the mid-1670s' bore witness to not just a 'renaissance of Anglican devotional writing', but also 'the maturation of a number of the great corporate philanthropies of the established church' (pp. 26–7). London divines such as Anthony Horneck, William Beveridge, and William Smythies championed a popular 'programme of preaching, pastoral care, theological controversy, and religious charity', underpinned by a renewed understanding of the Lord's Supper as the zenith of public worship (p. 50 and p. 28). By the reign of James II, this emerging 'Anglican revival' constituted a 'pious anti-politics' which had the effect of dividing the Church into 'a small court party of churchmen willing to collude in Catholic absolutism and a broad-based clerical opposition rooted in the metropolis and steeped in popular anti-popery' (p. 63 and p. 46). Here, 'Anglican opposition' to the Crown was neither a 'brittle reaction' designed to restore an intolerant confessional polity nor 'part of a broadly secular movement to modernize the English polity', for it was couched in an efficacious 'programme of pastoral engagement' (p. 63 and p. 66).

'Revolutionary Anglicanism' looked forwards not backwards. Upon the accession of William III, the episcopate was refreshed with men drawn predominantly from the metropolis and debate about comprehension was 'situated amidst a far broader public conversation regarding ecclesiastical renewal' (p. 73 and p. 75). As convocation faltered, Gilbert Burnet's *Discourse of the Pastoral Care* (1692) stood as an 'enduring monument to the spirit of pastoral renewal' (p. 89); however, despite the active support of Queen Mary and Archbishop Tillotson, 'the initiative of moral and ecclesiastical reform was clearly slipping away from the court' (p. 89 and p. 91). Born of the religious and moral ferment on the streets of London, the newly formed Societies for the Reformation of Manners (SRMs) not only 'exhibited broad continuities with ... Anglican revivalism', but did so by using the 'language of commercial organization' to promote a vision of a 'national reformation' (p. 93 and p. 95). The rise of the SRMs challenged reform-minded churchmen to expand the methodological parameters of their 'project'. Set against the backdrop of the 'growing religious and moral autonomy of the "associational world" that lay beyond the Church of England', some clergymen campaigned to restore convocation whilst others sought to embrace the idea of 'clerical association'. By 1698 the second inclination had given way to Thomas Bray's SPCK.

'The SPCK was obviously an instrument of Anglican renewal'; however, the 'ideological diversity' of the Society's early membership, whilst 'remarkable' for the time, was a stumbling block to producing a single, consensual programme of reform (p. 111 and p. 115). That being said, such heterogeneity helped the Society to foster alliances with other religious associations and attract support from within more secular institutions too. As a result the early SPCK looked like 'an atlas of English benevolence' (p. 120). There was much about the SPCK's domestic agenda that was 'deeply conservative' and 'designed to reinforce the boundaries of the parish and strengthen the hand of the clergy against the traditional enemies of the Church' (p. 121). 'But the SPCK found it exceedingly difficult to confine its interests to parish Anglicanism' (p. 125). The 'improvisational quality of the SPCK engagement with non-parochial populations at home and abroad' not only demonstrated 'unprecedented adaptability', but promoted a more innovative ecumenical streak which allowed the Church to take on a defining role as 'vanguard of Protestant internationalism' (p. 131 and p. 133). With this move the Society was 'impelled almost imperceptibly toward the Whigs' and by the accession of George I the SPCK saw 'the cause of the Church of England and the cause of Hanover' as essentially 'one and the same' (p. 142 and p. 146).

If 'Anglican revival ... precluded the endangerment of the church' (p. 149), how did the high-church rhetoric of 'the church in danger' take hold? The mere existence of the post-revolutionary Church-State denigrated those who were convinced that outward religion constituted a separate and irreducible corporate entity. Hence, nonjurors 'protested not simply against the actions of an illegitimate Revolution state, but against the intrusions of the state *tout court*' (p. 157). Moreover, whilst the attack against 'sacerdotal' religion found its ultimate expression in the works of 'freethinkers', the rise of popular forms of non-parochial religious association worked at a more mundane level to challenge the tenet that church polity and church communion were effectively one and the same thing. By way of a response, the 'sacerdotalism of the

nonjurors unfolded into a broader cult of exteriority within the Church of England' and the 'Anglican high-church movement and the nonjurors' set about asserting a vision of religion that was about 'belonging rather than believing, membership in a society enacted through its governors, observance of its canons, and constant and faithful participation in its offices' (pp. 184–5). From this perspective, the SPCK pursued noble ends by insidious means; although dormant, convocation was a much more legitimate organ of church activism. 'Securing the recall of convocation was one matter, but refurbishing the body as an effective instrument of ecclesiastical renewal was quite another' (p. 194). During the reign of Queen Anne, the high-church clergy that dominated the lower house of convocation effected what amounted to a 'moral counter-revolution' against the bishops by attempting 'not only to revive the spiritual and moral life of the established church, but to do so in a way that ultimately vindicated the rights and prerogatives of the clergy' (p. 209). In this respect, 'one cannot but be struck by the extent to which the high-church agenda of the convocation ... mirrored that of the SPCK and allied organizations' (p. 189); but, whereas the latter went from strength to strength, the former was a 'colossal failure' (p. 190).

The Revolution of 1688–9 reinvigorated the Church of England in the Colonies and amidst 'the flush of revivalist energy' that followed 'Anglican expansion became not merely an establishment programme, but a wider societal concern' (p. 230). 'Though established by royal charter in 1701', the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), the 'venerable' offshoot of the SPCK, 'was cognizant during its first decades of its dependence upon civil society – particularly the mercantile sector of the metropole' (p. 231). With an understanding that trade could become a major vehicle for mission, proponents of 'Anglican expansion thus required that the Church overcome its own terrestrial ecclesiology' (p. 233). To this end, 'the Anglican voluntary sector' despatched missionaries and fostered a range of religiously orientated philanthropic endeavours in both the British Colonies and in places of 'strategic interest' across Asia and Continental Europe (p. 233 and p. 224). With few pretensions of 'imposing confessional homogeneity', these 'projects' aimed at 'establishing an informal, imperial pastorate to minister to a mobile and increasingly far-flung Anglican communion': this was the 'blue water policy of the Church of England' (p. 233). Here, 'Anglican revival' equipped 'early-eighteenth-century English men and women with the ideological and organizational resources to reimagine commercial and territorial expansion in moral terms' (p. 244). This 'expanded Anglican consciousness often blurred the line between missionary efforts in the strict sense of confessional aggrandizement and modern humanitarianism' (p. 243). Consequently, 'Anglicanism, rather than the abstract universalism of the later Enlightenment, provided the initial framework in which the suffering and deprivation of vulnerable populations could be contemplated at a distance' (p. 225).

A close reading of *The Christian Monitors* reveals a strange disconnect between select examples of Sirota's exposition and analysis, on the one hand, and his method and argument, on the other. Taken in isolation, discrete discussions are often insightful and presented with enviable clarity and control; however, these qualities stand in contrast to an approach which does not appear altogether suited to an investigation of religious association and a thesis which seems to owe more to feats of rhetoric than argumentation. The result is a mixed bag of delights and frustrations.

First the delights. In keeping with a recent historiographical trend of taking the supposedly epoch-defining characteristics of one period and showing how they were actually manifest much earlier, Sirota does a valiant job of further demonstrating that ‘the “golden age” of Victorian philanthropy is inconceivable without the institutional foundations’ of the late 17th and early 18th centuries (p. 2). One of the key strengths of this book is the extent to which it identifies a religious, or more specifically an ecclesiological, bridge between some of the intellectual and social strands of early ‘Enlightenment’. The Church of England was no stick-in-the-mud! The consequences of this may complicate the study of what some scholars see as ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ religiosity. Indeed, having so successfully avoided the trap of writing a teleological history of the rise of Methodism, Sirota’s work may have been enhanced by pushing the chronology forward just a few years to examine the activism of George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley. *The Christian Monitors* may also finally give scholars of the 18th-century Church of England greater confidence to move beyond studying the institution and tackle the socio-cultural world of its communicants.

Sirota is clearly in his element when examining shifting patterns of ecclesiastical politics within and between what might be viewed as the varieties of late 17th- and early 18th-century ‘Anglicanism’. The delineation of the ‘metropolitan’ opposition to James II and the subsequent limitations of Williamite reforms will be of considerable interest to all students of the period. Sirota’s take on the ferment of the 1690s is a welcome contrast to the picture presented by Craig Rose. The nuanced reading of the SPCK’s drift towards the Whigs and the high-church response to voluntary activism push the historiography forward. The challenge to the whole notion of early ‘Anglican imperialism’ is both clever and important. And, the idea of non-parochial Christian monitoring has an intriguing paradigmatic quality which may stimulate further enquiry.

Now for the frustrations. Some scholars may raise a sceptical eyebrow at the idea that political theology is neither an appropriate nor effective interpretative paradigm for studying the Revolution of 1688–9. Furthermore, it is not altogether obvious that Sirota escapes the methodological confines of the paradigm that he himself seeks to repudiate. In an admirable attempt to carve out a politically inflected ecclesiastical history of pious association, Sirota’s approach proves too restrictive to take account of a wealth of relevant expertise in other sub-disciplinary fields. Here, an early preoccupation with reconceptualising ‘Revolutionary Anglicanism’ may have had some unfortunate side effects. Sirota’s ‘*societas Christiana*’ risks being viewed as a rather naive label (p. 9), cut-off from both the historical theology of *koinōnia* and the historical philosophy of *koinōnia politikē* and *respublica*, and presented without serious recourse to the historiography which has engaged with notions of ‘civil society’ through the seminal interpretative paradigms of Tönnies, Habermas, Foucault, and Bourdieu. This lack of theoretical nous is all the more perplexing given Sirota’s decision to effectively ignore Peter Clark’s exemplary empirical study *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800*.⁽²⁾ An unwillingness to critique either Clark’s account of the religious antecedents of Britain’s 18th-century ‘associational world’ or his not inconsiderable conclusions about the relatively subdued collective achievements of Britain’s 18th-century societies leaves *The Christian Monitors* dangerously exposed. In addition, Sirota does little to rescue his appeal to the ‘age of benevolence’ from its Whiggish connotations. In the period under investigation, philanthropy was hardly an end in itself, but rather a means of piety.⁽³⁾ In only examining the ecclesiological purview of ‘Anglican’ piety, a broader sense of piety *qua* piety risks being lost in plain sight. An understanding of the Church’s covenant theology also goes some way to explaining the impulse amongst self-appointed pious individuals to not only intervene in the lives of others but to conceive of a collective piety which needed continual, active attention. Historians will always be divided on the relative merits of searching for the beginnings of ‘modern’ phenomena: this debate is perhaps best left alone here.

A commitment to challenging the subtly outmoded work of Dudley Bahlman, Gareth Bennett, and J. C. D. Clark deflects attention from the timidity with which *The Christian Monitors* seeks to position itself with respect to the most relevant historiography. The ghost of Foucault haunts the attempt to write a political history of ‘pious anti-politics’. John Spurr and Eamon Duffy effectively dismantled Bahlman’s ‘moral revolution’ thesis some time ago. Furthermore, despite displaying a distinct reverence for Spurr’s scholarship, a forthright evaluation of the mighty *Restoration Church, 1646–1689* ⁽⁴⁾ is curiously absent.

Sirota's brave attempt to supplant an interpretation of the agency of 'latitudinarian' divines with one of 'metropolitan' divines fails to directly and specifically critique pertinent arguments by Isabel Rivers, Gary De Krey, and Peter Borsay. Noteworthy monographs by Donald Spaeth and W. M. Jacob are (perhaps too conveniently) reduced to fleeting references in the endnotes. Comments on the commercial dynamism of the 'Anglican revival' are suggestive, but they rarely appear to be firmly located within a robust understanding of political economy: Steve Pincus's provocative, re-reading of the Habermas thesis in *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (5) is a curious omission here. Some comment on Katherine Carté Engel's probing essay on limits of the SPCK's contribution to 'international Protestantism' might also have been expected.

Such is the force of Sirota's writing, readers may be forgiven for thinking that the 'Anglican revival' was an historical phenomenon acknowledged and understood by the likes of Horneck and Bray; but, this is not the case. Whilst it is true that the SPCK often revelled in an inclusive propaganda of 'improvement', deploying the historiographical construct of 'Anglican revival' is arguably neither necessary nor particularly helpful. Just because the likes of John Spurr have persuasively deployed the terminology of 'Anglicanism' as an historiographical descriptor within the confines of their own studies, this does not automatically give licence to others to talk of early modern 'Anglicanism' without qualification; indeed, it is probably incumbent upon every scholar to make their own unique case for doing so. Sirota's sense of 'Anglicanism' tends to be stated rather than argued. This is a problem when trying to understand the relationship between the activities of such contrasting historical figures as William Beveridge and William Smythies, or Edward Stephens and Thomas Bray. Scholars should be careful not to cast the negative solidarity of popular anti-popery as a form of positive 'Anglican' solidarity. The historical ubiquity of the former across the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries also negates the idea that this criterion can be marshalled to explain the existence of any one, chronologically discrete, form of 'Anglicanism'. A similar claim may also be made for the perennial quest to improve the overall quality of the clergy and for communicants' desire to participate in the Lord's Supper. (6) Sirota's relentless and largely uncritical insistence that all the activity he describes should be characterized as part of a distinct 'revival' is troubling. Martin E. Marty recently voiced his frustration at the fetish amongst church historians for the terminology of 'revival', 'renewal', 'resurgence', and many other, similar 're-' words. (7) Put bluntly, a reliance upon such terms can lead to insular, circular claims of limited value. This problem is exemplified by Sirota's own definition of 'Anglican revival': 'The Anglican revival of the later 17th and early 18th centuries was an ecclesiastical programme of moral and religious renewal, decidedly less orientated towards the procurement of spontaneous individual conversions than the broader refurbishing of the national confession' (p. 262). This looks worryingly like the beginning of a rhetorical tautology. In sum, the principal concern here is twofold. One, that the 'Anglican revival' is both an essential premise and a formative conclusion of Sirota's book. Two, that this most striking phrase is in danger of appearing as little more than a rhetorical device to impress upon the reader a sense of coherence and prominence which is not always clearly borne out by the evidence.

Reviewing some of the key elements of metropolitan religious activism in the decade before the Revolution of 1688–9 can help to draw attention to this problem. Bishop Compton may have increased demands upon London clergy from 1677, but it is somewhat unclear how such prescriptions were received let alone acted upon. Huguenot refugees tended to find that support from the English Church-State was contingent upon Conformity and that the authorities discouraged them from settling in London. Despite a royal charter in 1678, The Sons of the Clergy remained a fairly weak organization until the age of Archbishop Secker. Beveridge and Smythies were hardly ideological bedfellows even if their respective forms of associational activism ended up looking similar. As a pious, charismatic German, Horneck was something of a one-off. The kind of devotional societies championed by Horneck were small in number, semi-private in character, and part of a continuing history of religious association that encompassed both 'godly' household seminaries and the Arminian community at Little Gidding (act. 1626–57). Conformist devotional writings of the 1670s and 1680s also sat within a rich tradition of English practical divinity that stretched back to the work of William Perkins. Without recourse to either manifestations of negative solidarity or historically ubiquitous traits of the post-Reformation Church of England, in what way were all these activities part of a common

cause or ethos? What, exactly, was being ‘revived’?

Similar concerns undermine the general thrust of many other discussions in book. Sirota inexplicably overlooks Edward Stephens’s claim about the SRMs starting out in Tower Hamlets and the Strand in 1690 in favour of William Yate’s venture at Lincoln Inn’s chambers in 1691 (p. 92). The worry here is that the earlier example may have been a more straightforward response to events on the ground rather than any attempt to engage with the ‘broader ecology of London revivalism’ (p. 93). The national success of the SRMs and the SPCK may have had less to do with new forms of commercial organization and more to do with the way in which the complex interests of pre-existing groups and networks formed by corporations of the poor, societies of merchants, livery companies, county feasts, and inter-parochial clerical meetings were given a novel twist by the forces of urbanization. Despite the innovation of a small band of *avant-garde* committed to the ideals of international Protestantism, it was surely the more conservatively minded, parochial and national support for charity schools that stood as the defining success story of early 18th-century associational religious activism.

It is difficult to see how the initial hype surrounding this book is really justified. Nevertheless, *The Christian Monitors* provides a stimulating, highly readable account of a hitherto under-studied aspect of the changing nature of the Church of England between the 1680s and 1720s. The book’s ultimate legacy may have less to do with the dubious bombast of ‘Anglican revival’ and more to do with the way it forces scholars to think harder about the tensions between the moral and confessional, the associational and parochial, the benevolent and sacramental, and the edifying and soteriological experiences of the 18th century Church of England.

Notes

1. Brent Sirota, ‘The Christian Monitors: Church, State, and the Voluntary Sector in Britain, 1690–1720’, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Chicago, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. W. M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 155.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646–1689* (New Haven, CT, 1991).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (Manchester, 2007).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Arnold Hunt, ‘The Lord’s Supper in Early Modern England’, *Past & Present*, 161 (1998), 39–83.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Martin E. Marty, ‘Review of *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History*, eds Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory’, *Church History*, 79 (2010), 743–5.[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review, and thanks Dr. Manning for his reflections.

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