

Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland from the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire

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Over the past decade growing numbers of students have undertaken research into the religious dimension of the recent history of the British Isles, and in doing so have expanded its agenda away from the traditional focus on the history of doctrine and ecclesiastical institutions. At the same time political, cultural, social and economic historians have also increasingly recognised religion as a significant explanatory factor or analytical category in their own accounts, nowhere more so than in the study of Britain in the long eighteenth century: witness its significance in the contrasting work of, for example, Linda Colley and Jonathan Clark.

What we have so far lacked are significant works of synthesis from historians of religion -- transcending the scale of the growing body of case-studies, but informed by the understanding that involvement in the sub-discipline inevitably provides -- which set out boldly to address the place of religion in the wider culture. We therefore have cause to be grateful to David Hempton, who has bravely attempted the theme of the contribution of religion to political culture and identity from the Glorious Revolution to the First World War and beyond, and taken within his compass not only England, but also Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

Hempton is, of course, peculiarly well qualified to undertake such an enterprise, having already made substantial contributions to the history of evangelical protestantism on both sides of the Irish Sea, but his achievement is none the less considerable. Above all, Hempton demonstrates great powers of synthesis. The book is quite short, and deliberately and happily retains signs of its origins in the Cadbury lectures Hempton delivered in Birmingham in 1993, being lively, opinionated, sometimes witty and above all readable. Yet this light touch disguises the underpinning: a careful and critical reading of a prodigious body of both published and unpublished recent scholarship, generously acknowledged by Hempton. As a result, the volume represents an excellent point of departure for anyone seeking an overview of recent work on British and Irish religious history not only in its relation to political culture, but more generally. Indeed sometimes the discussion is if anything too wide-ranging, wandering from the focus on 'political' culture promised by the title in such a way as to obscure the overall direction of the argument. None the less, the book will prove of considerable use to tutors seeking a reliable introduction to both religious history and to its importance which will be accessible to the increasing number of undergraduates with no background in the subject. In

this respect the volume resembles John Wolffe's recent study *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland 1843-1945* (London, Routledge, 1994), with which it clearly overlaps in theme and scope. Wolffe, admittedly, is concerned primarily with the interplay of religion and nationhood, whereas Hempton wishes to explore in addition regional and local identities, but questions of national identity inevitably figure prominently throughout the book. The two studies are, however, complimentary rather than competitors. Wolffe's has a narrower chronological span, and ventures more determinedly into the twentieth century. The volumes also have different centres of gravity, Wolffe working out from an English focus, Hempton offering a counterbalancing emphasis on the experience of the "Celtic fringes". Moreover, since both authors choose to explore their theme through a series of illustrative investigations rather than attempting a comprehensive account, despite their shared background in the study of evangelical protestantism they frequently offer different emphases even where they traverse similar ground.

What then, does Hempton have to offer? The first part of the book consists of a number of case-studies of particular traditions or regions: the Church of England in the long eighteenth century; Methodism; evangelicalism in Wales and Scotland; Irish catholicism; and Ulster protestantism. These explore the factors strengthening or weakening each tradition as a source of identity, and the nature of the identities they fostered. Then follows a discussion of religion in the urban context of nineteenth-century Britain, and the volume concludes with a thematic consideration of the relationship between faith and identity as illustrated in protestantism and anti-catholicism, evangelicalism, empire and missions, and the formation of social policy.

The case-studies get the volume off to a good start. The account of the Hanoverian Church of England manages to bring together a good cross-section of recent scholarship and to adjudicate sensibly between the most "optimistic" and "pessimistic" accounts of the Church's pastoral achievement and of the nature and consequences of its relationship with the state. Inevitably there are a few points where one might question the interpretation. Certainly the proliferation of clerical magistrates and more effective clerical exactions may have contributed to the rise of overt anticlericalism in the countryside from the late eighteenth century (p. 9). But it also surely owed something to an increased availability in radical literature and prints of a framework for interpreting local disputes with, or even simple irritation at, the clergy as part of a conflict with wider ramifications, giving the individual a sense of his place in and responsibility to a greater cause. Such considerations perhaps deserve more consideration in a work concerned primarily with identities.

The chapter on Methodism offers an excellent account of the various approaches historians have brought to the subject of Methodist growth and decline, and examines the present state of debate on the issues raised by the Halevy thesis in the light of Hempton's own work. Others better qualified than this reviewer must be left to provide a verdict on Hempton's judgements on the religious history of Wales and Scotland. Certainly the two are at least effectively brought together in a reflection on the interrelationship of denominational and national identity in the two countries which highlights the significance in this respect of contrasting social and ecclesiastical structures. English readers will be grateful for the guidance Hempton offers through the literature here, but probably even more so in his two chapters on Irish affairs.

In this section Hempton once more draws profitably on his own researches, this time with Myrtle Hill for their *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740-1890*, and the result is one of the best short introductions to the Ulster protestant tradition currently available, at once sufficiently detached to point up ironies and ambiguities, while conveying a vivid and sensitive picture of the historical sources of the tradition's resilience. In particular Hempton underlines the significance of evangelicalism. It acted as a solvent of social and denominational barriers which might otherwise have impeded the melding of the Ulster protestant identity, and in relation to sectarian conflict was able to simultaneously narrow the focus to a contest between reformed religion and Catholic superstition in Ireland and widen it to an international conflict of major proportions . . . Depending on circumstances, therefore, Ulster Protestants could think of themselves as either a faithful remnant of righteousness in a pagan land or as part of a great and civilising world empire. They were equally comforting and culturally reinforcing ideas. (p. 110) The account of Irish Catholicism is similarly balanced and sensitive, critically assessing the results of revisionist scholarship.

Hempton emphasises the factors that made the contours of its history differ significantly from those of the other traditions he considers, in particular its ability, like Ulster protestantism, to draw strength from social and political conflicts of the kind which elsewhere undermined religious loyalties.

When Hempton turns to the discussion of religion and political culture in urban Britain, another effective synthesis is given an unusual slant through an extended consideration of the Victorian novel as evidence for the substance of popular belief and experience of religion. He uses this to reinforce the testimony of oral history for the existence of a common religious culture, a "religio-moral homogeneity" (p. 136), avoiding metaphysical abstractions and with a strong ethical component, which extended far beyond official Christianity. Its existence owed much to "the extent to which a predominantly evangelical pietism managed to spread its values and preoccupations far beyond the doors of the churches it controlled" (p. 141), but Hempton concludes, along with most recent scholarship, that by the end of the nineteenth century introversion within denominations and the impact of suburbanization, state welfarism and leisure alternatives had weakened the hold of the churches throughout urban Britain.

The final chapter is in many ways the most ambitious. Hempton sets out to demonstrate through a discussion of its four themes how the same forces could promote national integration and yet also promote separation. His account of protestantism indeed provides both a useful elaboration and qualification to the stress on its integrative role that was so central to Colley's *Britons*, as does his consideration of evangelicalism. Hempton argues that the decline of both anti-catholicism and evangelical protestantism, along with that of imperialism, has eroded links between religion and national identity in the British Isles. More strikingly, he claims that even more significant in this process has been "the inexorable decline of religious influence in the construction and implementation of social policy" (p. 163). There is an important point here, concerning the failure of Christian social visions to impose themselves on what increasingly appeared the core functions of the state and on policy formation and public responses. However, Hempton does not allow himself enough space to permit the relationship of this development to questions of "identity" to be satisfactorily expounded. Moreover, he offers us little clue as to the nature of the "secularized" versions of identities, and in particular of "Britishness" and its constituent nationalisms, which he presumably believes superseded those to which he illustrates religion was central.

The reader is forcibly struck by a two themes which emerge repeatedly in the book. Above all, as in the last chapter, Hempton emphasises the difficulty of attaching any single political or cultural meaning to the religious traditions he considers. As recent scholarship continues to amplify the body of evidence on which we can draw, it is no longer possible to pronounce confidently on the "conservative" or "radical", "emancipatory" or "repressive", "integrative" or "divisive" character of, for example, Anglican, Methodist or evangelical politics. Depending on the geographical, social, political or cultural context, different aspects of each tradition could find expression. This proteanism can be found exhibited even in a single individual: witness Wesley's sense of his special mission to the poor in England in contrast to his pastoral practice in Ireland working through gentry and garrison. Similarly, ambiguities could be found pervading traditions: thus anticlericalism was not merely an "external" rejection of the financial exactions and disciplinary actions of Anglican clergy, but also, as methodist ministers were later to discover, an authentic "internal" expression of the English popular protestantism which was one important root of popular identification with their denomination. If Hempton's volume already demonstrates the difficulties in navigating a clear path between ambiguities and contrasts thrown up by recent research, the overall lesson none the less remains the need for further work so that we can properly assess the findings of existing studies.

A second recurring theme is the pivotal importance of the era of the French Revolution and the Revolutionary Wars as a turning-point in the history of religion in all parts of the British Isles. Hempton argues, for example, that it was a crisis for establishments, as churches' "access to power and the resources of the state" become less important in determining their fortunes than their ability to "reflect the social, political and cultural aspirations of their members" (p. 178); indeed a sense of exclusion might now become a positive advantage. The Church of England, while emboldened by a new sense of its social utility as a guarantor of order, emerged weakened by demographic change, the threat of Methodism, the intellectual

challenge of new critiques of establishment, lack of state support, and the social tensions fostered by the wartime subsistence crisis. The same social tensions saw the transformation of an undenominational phenomenon of revival during a period of increased denominational discipline, and consequent fragmentation. In Ireland, meanwhile, the heightened tensions of the revolutionary period promoted sectarian conflict, while millenarian traditions within Ulster protestantism received a powerful impulse of enduring significance.

Hempton's emphasis on this period not only mirrors recent work in the political, social and cultural histories of modern Britain, but underlines the prescience of W. R. Ward's writings on the topic a quarter of a century ago, notably his seminal article "The Religion of the People and the Problem of Control 1790-1830", the influence of which Hempton acknowledges. Few would question the overall importance of the period, although in places one might query Hempton's relative weighting within it. For example, Stewart J. Brown has rightly emphasised the significant injection of funds and evidence of elite commitment to the principle of establishment in England, Scotland and Ireland apparent in the decade after 1815, the date at which Hempton sees the Church of England as "in a more vulnerable position than at any time since the Restoration in 1660", abandoned by a state "more committed to maintaining order than to propping up a national religious establishment" (p. 22). But if it was ultimately defeated, it was the strength and seriousness of this establishmentarian initiative which itself generated a backlash that primarily effected that defeat.

It is no doubt a lazy reviewing practice to point out omissions in a book which makes no claims to comprehensive coverage. None the less many readers will feel that more attention might have been paid to questions of gender. Any consideration of religion's relationship to political identity ought surely to grapple with the extent to which it sustained or subverted the gendered nature of citizenship and participation, not least because at times during the period considered religion offered women significant points of entry to public life. A historian of nineteenth-century Anglicanism may also be permitted to regret the curtailing of discussion of this tradition in the 1830s. We still know astonishingly little about the political expression of Anglicanism in the later nineteenth century at any other than an elite level. Moreover, a consideration of the development of church party in the mid-nineteenth century might also shed a slightly different light on the problems that tradition faced after 1790. Without denying the significance of structural administrative problems, the changing relationship with the state and the impact of social change to which Hempton attaches so much importance, I think he underplays the extent to which this church's problems were as much a product as a cause of weakness and instability in "identity", as its theological and ecclesiological ambiguities made it difficult to relate unproblematically to the wider religious components in national and communal identity and so facilitate effective political and cultural expression.

This perhaps leads on to a more general observation about the treatment of "identity" in the book. Questions of identity have exercised historians in many different fields in recent years, but perhaps nowhere with more consequence in modern British history than in work concerned with social structure and categories. Historians influenced by the "linguistic turn", such as Patrick Joyce, Gareth Stedman Jones and Dror Wahrman have directed attention to the discursive construction of social identity and the deficiencies of older historical narratives constructed around the "rise of class" as an "objective" social reality mirrored in language. They have pioneered exciting new approaches to the importance of narratives, cultural tropes and the "imaginary" in actively shaping the experiences of both individuals and collectivities as they navigated their political, social and economic lives, both public and private. It is puzzling that Hempton engages so little with this literature, for it seems to have a great deal to offer his project, not least in making it easier to navigate through the complexities of paradox and ambiguity of meaning in identities.

For example, it is surprising in a work centrally concerned with the complex issues of identity to find class-consciousness and identity generally closely yoked to "class" and "class conflict", and so perhaps unintentionally presented as if they fairly transparently expressed the identity of "real" social formations of the early years of the nineteenth century. This seems to me unhelpfully to restrict the terms in which Hempton is able to conduct his discussion of the interaction of religious and socio-political identity, creating

the impression of a "reductionism at one remove" which is successfully avoided in the direct discussion of religion. Hempton might have made use, for example, of the work of Patrick Joyce, which would have shown how important narratives of "populism" rather than class might be in the construction of both mass and individual identities among nineteenth-century workers, narratives which might be far more accommodating to religious discourse than those of class. Indeed Joyce's micro-study of the construction of self-identities in these terms by Edwin Waugh and John Bright in his *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (CUP, 1994) is a remarkably sensitive demonstration of just how important religious discourses might be in such self-fashioning, and suggests helpful ways of exploring in detail themes Hempton himself raises in a brief discussion of trade unions and radicalism. In particular, I think the explicit emphasis on narrative frameworks for self-understanding in Joyce's work could have been of considerable use to Hempton in explaining the robustness of religious dimensions of identity in the nineteenth century.

I do not mean in these remarks to demand that Hempton become a card-carrying postmodernist, or to claim that adopting this approach would force a substantial modification of the book's overall thrust and chronological emphases. Rather, I think that it might perhaps have provided an extra dimension to points that are often already implicit in his account, and have given greater clarity to the necessarily compressed treatment of the myriad of different conjunctions in which religious discourse contributed to expressions of identity during the period Hempton covers. As it stands, Hempton's book is a splendidly subtle, suggestive and reliable point of departure for further research in this field. It might be suggested that one promising approach, which has been too much neglected by historians of late, would be to take a lead from Joyce's example and attempt micro-studies of how Hempton's themes were played out in the construction of individual self-identities.

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