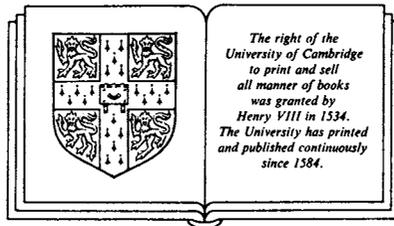


Pulpits, politics and public order in England 1760–1832

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Contents

Acknowledgements	page xi
List of abbreviations	xii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
PART I PRE-REVOLUTION, 1760–1789	9
1 <i>Christian political theory</i>	11
The established church	12
The other Christian churches	21
2 <i>The religious context</i>	32
Theology	32
Scripture	34
Ecclesiology	36
Civil and religious rights	37
3 <i>The political context</i>	40
Secular politics and the constitution in the state	40
The use and interpretation of history	50
Religious politics and the constitution in the church	53
4 <i>The philosophical context</i>	60
Patriarchalist and contractarian thought	61
Moral epistemology and the nature of man	63
Civic virtue and Christian meekness	64
Hume and the Enlightenment	67
5 <i>Case study I: William Paley</i>	73
6 <i>Secularisation and social theory</i>	83
Secularisation	83
Social theory	84

PART II REVOLUTION, 1789–1804	95
7 <i>The political and social context</i>	97
The major themes	97
The chronology of argument	98
8 <i>Political theory and the rights of man</i>	109
Political obligation	109
The rights of man	115
Equality	118
Religious liberty and rights	120
9 <i>Social theory and the nature of man</i>	127
The social hierarchy	127
The poor	130
Restraint	132
Morality and social order	135
Popular education	138
Conscience and eschatology	140
The nature of man	142
10 <i>Christianity, infidelity and government</i>	145
Christianity and government	145
Infidelity	151
11 <i>Case study II: Samuel Horsley</i>	160
The synthesis of Horsley's thought	161
Constitutional thought	164
Social thought	166
Conclusion	172
PART III POST-REVOLUTION, 1804–1832	175
12 <i>Political and social theory</i>	177
Political theory	177
Social theory	182
13 <i>Establishment and social control</i>	187
Religion and education	187
The Bible Society, 1810–1812	190
The Schools Societies, 1811–1812	193
Lord Sidmouth's Bill, 1811	195
Conclusion	198
14 <i>Blasphemy and sedition</i>	200
The clergy and conspiracy theory	200

Jeremy Bentham	202
Richard Carlile	205
The blasphemy trials	207
15 <i>Case study III: William Hone</i>	214
Hone and Unitarianism	215
Hone as publisher	220
Conclusion	225
16 <i>Emancipation and reform</i>	229
The Emancipation and Reform movements, 1804–1828	229
The reform of the constitution in church and state, 1828–1832	238
<i>Conclusion</i>	248
Changing paradigms and agenda	248
The social function of the church	252
‘The Rise and Fall of Metaphysical Systems’	256
Bibliographical appendix	259
Bibliography	270
Index	317

Introduction

It is no uncommon foible with those who are honoured with the acquaintance of the great, to attribute national events to particular persons, particular measures, to the errors of one man, to the intrigues of another, to any possible spark of a particular occasion, rather than to the true proximate cause, (and which alone deserves the name of a cause) the predominant state of public opinion. And still less are they inclined to refer the latter to the ascendancy of speculative principles, and the scheme or mode of thinking in vogue. I have known men, who with significant nods and the pitying contempt of smiles, have denied all influence to the corruptions of moral and political philosophy and with much solemnity have proceeded to solve the riddle of the French Revolution by ANECDOTES! Yet it would not be difficult, by an unbroken chain of historic facts, to demonstrate that the most important changes in the commercial relations of the world . . . had their origin not in the cabinets of statesmen, or in the practical insight of the men of business, but in the closets of uninterested theorists, or in the visions of recluse genius. To the immense majority of men even in civilised countries speculative philosophy has ever been, and must ever remain, a terra incognita. Yet it is not the less true, that the *epoch-forming* Revolutions of the Christian world, the revolutions of religion and with them the civil, social and domestic habits of the nations concerned, have co-incided with the rise and fall of metaphysical systems. (S. T. Coleridge 1816)¹

Just as it is essential to study the history of ideas in the context of the society which produced them, so is it necessary to relate changes in that society to the beliefs, values and basic assumptions of its members. The secularisation of political thought is one of the most fundamental developments in the intellectual history of England in the last three hundred years. It has been, in part, the result of changes in the social and economic organisation of life and in the nature and function of government, but it has, itself, contributed to those changes through its effect on the basic attitudes to society and government of both subjects and rulers. The period from 1760 to 1832 saw crucial changes in the way the English related their religious beliefs to their

¹ 'The Statesman's Manual', *Works*, vol. 6, pp. 1–114 (pp. 13–15). (In all cases, where emphases appear in quotations, these are in the original work.)

views of politics and society. Those changes form the basis of this study.

Any student of the history of ideas in this period works today in the context of two recent scholarly traditions; one that of Sir Lewis Namier and his critics, the other that led by J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. Namier would certainly have incurred Coleridge's wrath; for all his immense gifts to historical scholarship and methodology, he underestimated the importance of ideas and ideals in determining human conduct. His critics, most notably Herbert Butterfield, rightly re-emphasised the importance of the role of principles and beliefs. But Namier's exposition of the structure of politics and the pursuit of power was such that now we must look at men's professed values and the use they made of principled arguments in a new and more sceptical light.²

The old study of the history of political theory as a set of timeless abstract ideas largely divorced from the clamour of political debate which produced them has been criticised by Skinner and Pocock with considerable effect.³ They apply a degree of Namierite scepticism to the classic expressions of political philosophy and urge a study of ideas based on a wider range of sources and more aware of the significance of language. They warn against the construction, through extrapolation, of a complex philosophy from the random and unconnected comments of an individual, which imposes a false coherence on his thought. Rather, the historian of ideas must seek to understand the lack of coherence by examining the precise circumstances which led men to select and use specific arguments at particular times.

This book is, of course, influenced by these two major traditions. It takes, however, two more specific exemplars. The first is Christopher Hill's Ford Lectures of 1962.⁴ In his introduction to these, Hill outlines in broad and telling brushstrokes an understanding of the complex role of ideas in history which later scrutiny has done nothing to diminish. He recognises that 'ideas were all important for the individuals whom they impelled into action; but the historian must attach equal importance to the circumstances that gave these ideas their chance'. However, like Marx, Hill avoids 'the error of

² Namier's approach is reflected not only in his classic works, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, second edition (London, 1957), and *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, second edition (London, 1961), but also, in miniature, in his review of Norman Sykes's *Church and State*, 'Church and State in Eighteenth-Century England', in *Crossroads of Power* (London, 1962), pp. 184–6. H. Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, revised edition (New York, 1957), 'George III and the Namier School', *Encounter*, 43 (April 1957), 70–6.

³ Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3–53; 'Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts', *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 393–408. J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays in Political Thought and History* (New York, 1971); 'Virtues, Rights and Manners: A Model for Historians of Political Thought', *PT*, 9 (1981), 353–68.

⁴ C. Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965).

thinking that men's ideas were merely a pale reflection of their economic needs, with no history of their own'.⁵

The second exemplar is H. T. Dickinson's study of political ideology in eighteenth-century Britain.⁶ Dickinson seeks to combine the Butterfield and the Skinner-Pocock critiques of Namier. He argues that, while there is no need to abandon the realism of Namierite historians, we must recognise that 'political agents both act *and* think'. If the historian 'does not understand the values of a particular society, then he will not understand the political agents of that society. To understand these political values, he must examine the political rhetoric, the arguments, prejudices and assumptions of the age.'⁷

Neither Hill nor Dickinson goes as far as Coleridge in alleging that ideas were the predominant cause of political and social change; nor will this book. The links between the arguments set forth and the specific political circumstances in which they were used will be explored. But it will not be assumed that the ideas were merely a reflection of those circumstances. As Hill argues, ideas have a history of their own. Certainly, however, their history was much influenced by the political circumstances surrounding them. Traditional ideas and customary ways of thinking interacted with events in a dialectical fashion to produce new arguments and emphases and even, in the long term, new values and assumptions. To understand those changes it is necessary to examine both the political and social history of the period under study and the history of ideas within it.

Religion is something of an umbrella concept. Its major concerns are spiritual, eternal and soterial. It is important always to remember that its political and social dimensions examined in this study are secondary and incidental to its major purpose. However, many of its multifarious aspects do relate to political and social life. In its Christian form it incorporates a set of spiritual beliefs, ranging from creation to judgment and life after death, which deeply influence man's view of the purpose of life and his perception of his real interests. Its scriptures contain specific moral precepts set out in general principles with a number of illustrative examples but do not provide a sufficiently comprehensive code to preclude some variety of interpretation. Religion assumes epistemological criteria which transcend the merely rational and human and provide man with a source of authoritative knowledge through divine revelation either in the form of written scriptures or through the teaching of the church. It also involves a number of ecclesiastical organisations which vary in their hierarchical structures, their

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1977).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7.

geographical extent and their relation to the state. These churches provide a professional clergy who, as well as carrying out spiritual duties, may also teach the laity and perform various social and political functions in the community.

Hill is well aware of the importance of religious ideas in seventeenth-century England. 'The Bible', he noted, 'especially the Geneva Bible with its highly political marginal notes, came near to being a revolutionist's handbook, not for the last time in history.'⁸ Dickinson pays less attention to religious arguments in the eighteenth century and so reflects in part the great degree of secularisation which had taken place in political thought in the intervening period. In a wide-ranging general survey this is, perhaps, understandable, but in fact a considerable number of religious arguments were still being used in the political debate of the period. Moreover the nature of those arguments and the use to which they were put were changing significantly in the last years of the century.

Those changes reflected the social and political events of the period, not only the French Revolution, but also the American struggle and the riots, unrest and political demonstrations at home. They also reflected, in Coleridge's words, 'the ascendancy of speculative principles, and the scheme or mode of thinking in vogue'. The effect of a century or so of rational-cum-empirical thought on Christian metaphysics and the influence of critical, scientific methodology on the study of the scriptures significantly changed the way some Christians applied religious ideas to the issues of their day. Their arguments were also greatly influenced by ecclesiastical politics. The privilege and status of the Church of England, the wish to defend the alliance between church and state, the desire for toleration by Catholics and Unitarians and for full civil rights by trinitarian Protestant Dissenters were all reflected in the varied reactions of men of different denominations. The history of Christian political thought needs to be set in the political and social context of events, the intellectual context of developments in philosophy and theology, and in the ecclesiastical context of the denominations' concern with toleration, civil rights and church politics.

The major areas of scholarship upon which this work touches and which form its context and foundation are reviewed below.⁹ In attempting to analyse the changing ways in which religious arguments were used in the formation of political and social theory, it seeks to fill a gap left by all of these studies. Most ecclesiastical historians concentrate upon one or a few denominations and largely neglect theoretical arguments. This book considers the political ideas of Catholic priests, Anglican clergymen, Dissenting

⁸ Hill, *Intellectual Origins*, p. 2.

⁹ See the Bibliographical appendix below, pp. 259–69.

ministers, laymen of all Christian denominations, trinitarian and unitarian, deists and atheists.

Social historians concentrate upon the churches' response to change and attitudes to social problems and policies, but have not fully considered the relationship between the theories of society inherent in these attitudes and the development of political thought in general.

Intellectual historians and students of political theory and ideology have tended until recently to ignore religious arguments in this period in a way that would have been unthinkable in sixteenth- or seventeenth-century studies. In an intellectual version of the Whig interpretation, the progressive triumph of rationalist scientific thought over supernatural and metaphysical beliefs is traced as an inevitable and laudable process. The concentration on natural religion is seen as progressive, the reassertion of the revealed nature of the Christian faith as retrograde.

The recent publications of Dr Jonathan Clark have focussed attention on religion as a significant element in the ideology of the ancien regime, and to some extent this book needs to be seen in the light of his work.¹⁰ It seeks to explore in detail a number of issues and attitudes which Clark touches upon only briefly in his pioneering and important work. Many of the conclusions it reaches are consistent with Clark's broad thesis, others dissent from it in significant ways. But this book has its own problematic and it should not be read simply in terms of the new agenda which Clark has proposed. In one sense, it seeks to be broader than Clark by giving a more balanced attention than he attempted to the views of those of all religious denominations, and of none.

But in other ways, of course, Clark's work is far more wide ranging. As the sub-titles of his books make clear, he is concerned with 'ideology, social structure and political practice', with 'state and society'. This book is concerned with the use of religious arguments in political and social theory. In Clark's work, religion constitutes only one theme, and it is not necessary to accept his arguments concerning the nature of political parties and the growth of radicalism to value what he has to say about the central position which religion occupied in eighteenth-century political ideology. This book should be seen neither as 'supporting' nor 'opposing' Clark in crude terms, but rather as an attempt to refine one area of his analysis. The implications of that refinement for Clark's wider purpose are, properly, beyond the scope of this book; to allow them to distort the analysis attempted here would be to capitulate to Clark's agenda; but where significant differences emerge,

¹⁰ Principally, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985), and *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1986).

these are established in the main body of the text, and summarised in the bibliographical appendix.

This book seeks to combine insights provided by the studies of political philosophy and the history of ideas, of popular ideology and political history, of theology and ecclesiastical history, and of sociology and social history. While it will attempt to examine the whole range of religious political thought, it will seek to redress existing imbalances in two ways. First it will pay no more attention than is absolutely necessary to the much-studied Evangelicals, though it will take their ideas seriously. Secondly it will give full weight to Catholic thought, which most Protestant writers tend to ignore.¹¹ It will not try to assess the practical effects of the ideas and theories it analyses nor will it consider social policies as distinct from social theory. The study is centred upon English and Welsh ideas, and Scottish and Irish thought will generally be excluded.¹² Only if a Scot, like David Hume, or an Irishman, like Edmund Burke, made a major impact in England is their work considered in any detail.

Another important and closely related issue that will be excluded is the religious reaction to developing economic theory. The relationship of Protestantism and capitalism, Christian attitudes to economic self-interest and acquisitiveness, religious attitudes to Mandeville in the early eighteenth century and Smith and Ricardo later, the economic theories of Dean Tucker and the Rev. Robert Malthus require a book, or rather a series of books, to themselves.¹³ Professor A. M. C. Waterman's forthcoming work on Christian Political Economy from 1798 to 1833 is eagerly awaited.

This work is based on the mass of published sermons, speeches, pamphlets and longer discourses which poured off metropolitan and provincial presses in these years and is now held by the Bodleian and the British Library. While some use of manuscript material has been made, the desire to examine those arguments employed in the public domain has led to a concentration upon printed material. This study centres upon the effect of the French Revolution, and an analysis of the changes of emphasis in Christian political and social theory in the 1790s constitutes the heart of its argument. These changes are set in context by a study of the thirty years before and thirty years after that critical decade. The reaction to events in France is thus placed in the fuller setting of English conservative and radical thought, of the growing alarm over riots and disorder, the dislocation arising

¹¹ Edward Norman and David Hempton are honourable exceptions. See also J. M. Turner, "'Of Methodists and Papists Compar'd'", *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 41 (1977), 37–8.

¹² On Scotland see W. M. Kirkland, 'The Impact of the French Revolution on Scottish Religious Life and Thought with Special Reference to Thomas Chalmers, Robert Haldane, and Neil Douglas' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1951).

¹³ On these issues see the works by M. M. Goldsmith, T. A. Horne, S. Rashid, W. G. Shelton, J. Viner and A. M. C. Waterman cited in the bibliography below.

from economic and social change in the countryside and from the growth of industrial towns, the movements for religious rights and parliamentary reform, for spiritual revivalism and moral improvement, the development of popular education and the rivalry between the established and Dissenting churches to provide it, and the growing awareness of the need for social control.

All the concerns of this book could be described as political thought in its widest sense. However, the terms political theory and social theory will be used in a narrower way to identify two aspects of that wider field. The term *political theory* is used to denote the traditional, central concerns of political philosophers relating to the origin of political society, the nature of governmental authority, the sources of political obligation, and the circumstances in which revolutionary changes in the form of government are permissible. The term *social theory* is used to denote theories of the nature of society, the importance of a clearly defined social hierarchy, the means by which social order and unity are maintained, the importance of effective social control, the nature of man and the need for restraints and sanctions on human behaviour. It will be claimed that there was a fundamental change of emphasis in Christian argument from political theory to social theory in the 1790s. This was accompanied by a decline in the use of religious arguments in political theory in favour of secular ones. The term *religious argument* is used here to denote an argument which consciously depended for its effectiveness on a belief in God and an acceptance of the authority of the scriptures or the church. The term *secular argument* denotes one which either did not make reference to God or things divine at all, or which did so only in a cosmetic way. When the name of God was invoked but the structure of the argument remained intact whether or not one believed in His existence, that is regarded here as a secular argument.

It will be argued that the secularisation of political thought was more something that occurred within the churches by a change of emphasis in clerical sermons and speeches than something that was imposed from outside by deists and atheists. However, the growing concentration on secular rather than religious arguments in political theory from the early 1790s was counterbalanced by an increasing emphasis on Christian social theory and on arguments of sanction and restraint.