

GODLY CLERGY IN
EARLY STUART ENGLAND
The Caroline Puritan Movement
c.1620–1643

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Introduction

‘All thought’, wrote Fernand Braudel, ‘draws life from contacts and exchanges’.¹ In a sense, this may serve as an epigram for all that follows. I have been concerned to trace a clerical community, or rather a series of overlapping and interlocking communities, to examine forms of contact and exchange, and to root these forms in a piety that encouraged a sociability beyond the stimuli of professional identity and the duties of kinship ties. The godly clergy who are the subject of this study took their relationships with their like-minded colleagues well beyond these ‘natural’ needs, and it is this heightened sense of community that needs to be explained. We should not assume that the very notion of ‘community’ is a trans-historical phenomenon, simply a matter of ‘friends getting together for a chat’. The communities that I deal with are not forms of the pre-modern, face-to-face, ‘natural’ communities of Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft* but the ‘imagined communities’ of a complex, pluralist society.² ‘Community’ here is not the organic solidarity of homogeneous individuals, not an integrative device as in Durkheim, but a way of thinking that aggregates and often serves to deny heterogeneities, particularly at the boundaries of community. As Arthur Hildersham pleaded: ‘Though we differ in iudgement in these things, yet should we endeavour, that the people may discern no difference, nor disagreements amongst us.’³

The communities that are the subject of this study defined themselves through a variety of voluntary religious practices which blurred our boundaries of religious, social and administrative activities. The intellectual

¹ F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, vol. I. *The Structures of Everyday Life: the Limits of the Possible* (London, 1981), p. 401.

² F. Tönnies, *Community and Society* (trans. C. P. Loomis) (London, 1955), originally published as *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Darnstadt, 1887); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1991); A. P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester, 1993). Anderson’s concern is largely with national communities, but the point applies here.

³ Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community*, pp. 20, 74; Arthur Hildersham, *CVIII Lectures upon the Fourth of John* (1632) p. 301.

and spiritual demands of the hotter sort of Protestantism challenged alternative allegiances and placed godly ministers in a network of like-minded brethren. This network in turn reinforced and sustained a particular style of piety. In conditions that made members of the godly clerical community feel under threat, even under a campaign of persecution, the protection of that community could come first, even at the expense of other loyalties.

To a large degree, the first half of this study can be seen as an extended meditation on the familiar theme from Durkheim that it is 'through common action that society becomes conscious of and affirms itself; society is above all an active cooperation. Even collective ideas and feelings are possible only through the overt movements that symbolize them. Thus it is action that dominates religious life, for the very reason that society is its source.'⁴ My interest in the relationships between collective consciousness and religion may be a symptom of a current shift the former conditions of society and faith that preoccupied Durkheim and his tutor Fustel de Coulanges⁵ have undergone, moving to an outlook where the primary focus of religion is on the relationship between a deity and the individual.⁶ If my interests are a response to my historical context, I have also taken Durkheim's terms of religion and society in their place in seventeenth-century discourse. Professor Bossy has alerted us to the archaeology of these crucial terms: in particular, I have taken 'society' as the Northamptonshire divine Robert Cawdrey defined it, as a fellowship rather than as a commonwealth,⁷ as a combination of individuals in a society rather than the modern (and usually capitalised) sense of an overarching society combining all within a nation. 'Religion' had a primary meaning of 'attitude of worship' or 'way of being pious' with an emergent abstract sense of a religion, of religions of differential veracity in a new condition of pluralism. This second sense, shorn of truth claims, is so powerfully our sense of the word that I have tended to employ the rather ugly term 'religiosity' in preference. The period in question was exactly that moment when, in both cases, the second sense was rising but the first still primary. In the strain between these two meanings, particular and general, I would

⁴ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (trans. and intro. K. E. Fields) (New York, 1995) p. 421.

⁵ N. D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: a Study on the Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (trans. W. Small) (Boston, Mass., 1900).

⁶ L. Revell, 'The Return of the Sacred', in S. Wolton (ed.), *Marxism, Mysticism and Modern Theory* (London, 1996) pp. 111–34.

⁷ J. Bossy, 'Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim', *PP 95* (1982) pp. 3–18; Robert Cawdrey, *A Table Alphabetical, Conteyning and Teaching the True Writing and Understanding of Hard Usual English Words . . .* (1604), s.v.

suggest, lies the problem of Puritanism, both for contemporaries and for historians.⁸

Having established some patterns of association and contact, rooted in clerical piety and practice, I have drawn out a series of exchanges conditioned by the changed ecclesiastical environment of the 1620s and 1630s which disrupted the settled patterns of voluntary religion. Through these years, new, and renewed, questions were raised which created and deepened fissures and faultlines within godly society. These debates can best be understood by placing them in the context of the relationship with the ecclesiastical establishment, not least in the episcopal visitations. The social context of the first part of this study provides a context for the debates which led, through a series of mutations and transformations, to what I have called the 'diaspora' of the godly ministers, the fragmentation of clerical society. Before the emergent divisions of the 1640s, the godly community can be seen in action, considering questions of flight or suffering, and of support for the ecumenical efforts of John Dury. This context also serves to illuminate the content of some of these debates, particularly on ecclesiological issues.

I have generally followed recent practice in preferring terms like 'the godly' and 'the professors' to the dangerously nominalistic category of 'Puritan'. The name was, of course, coined as a term of opprobrium, and many students of the period would add a hearty 'Amen' to John Yates' wish, 'that this offensive name of a Puritan, wandring at large, might have some Statute passe upon it, both to define it, & punish it: for certainly Satan gains much by the free use of it'.⁹ It may be true that Satan (or at least a considerable historiographical sub-discipline) has benefited from an over-enthusiastic employment of the term, but, as Ian Breward has pointed out, if contemporaries like Baxter had not used the term, historians would have had to invent it.¹⁰ Where I have used the word it is intended to denote an anti-formalist search for 'heart religion', for truly valid religious experience that found it difficult to endure any stumbling block to that search. Among the obstacles so perceived were, for some, the controverted Prayer Book ceremonies. Non-conformity is not the definition of a Puritan, merely the symptom of an unwillingness to compromise what is seen as a scripturally given form. Moreover, it will become clear that a considerable part of that world-view overlapped with that which has been called 'mere' Protestant and also that the dangers of the term are never more apparent than when it is assumed to have a single, static and essential referent. The

⁸ Bossy, pp. 3–5; R. Williams, *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1983 edn) pp. 291–5.

⁹ John Yates, *Ibis ad Caesarem* (1626) pt. III p. 40.

¹⁰ I. Breward, 'The Abolition of Puritanism', *JRH* 7 (1972) p. 32.

communities that form the heart of this study proved to be extraordinarily heterogeneous, but their members could all be called godly and most could fairly uncontroversially carry the name Puritan. In addition, it has become clear that the dangers of labelling a practice or a doctrine 'Puritan' spring in part from an insensitivity to social contexts and usages, but that the term, having the authority of contemporary currency, is admissible if used in ways that allow for fluidity and variety within the English Church.¹¹ I hope I have used it in these ways, having paid particular attention to the social patterns and connections that marked those referred to as Puritans as, in Petrine terms, 'a peculiar people'.

However, it is part of my contention that it is not necessary to adhere strictly to this rubric. The term 'godly' is useful because it has the *imprimatur* of self-application, because 'the godly' referred to themselves as such. This is certainly a valuable addition to our vocabulary in describing and understanding the behaviour of these people. We should not, however, adopt the self-image of a group as uncritically as scholars once accepted the terms used by others to describe them. Self-descriptions are as polemically loaded as labels applied by others. An 'objective' *via media* is not available, so we have to examine the dialectic between competing contemporary descriptions, each of which is positioned in seventeenth-century discourse. Accordingly, my usage varies somewhat, depending on the point of view refracted through a third perspective, my own, positioned in relation to these debates and those of modern historiography.

At this point, it may not be premature to offer some preliminary auto-critique, less to disarm potential critics than to make explicit the limits of the claims this study makes. What follows is far from a comprehensive account of a Stuart 'Puritan movement', if such a creature existed. Here, I want to draw attention to some of the more glaring deficiencies and suggest reasons beyond the usual limitations of space and talent.

The most serious criticism is perhaps that this is a study that discusses Puritanism in exclusively clerical terms. I must make it clear that the account given of clerical Puritanism is not in any way intended to stand metonymically for Puritanism as a whole. Puritanism was not exclusively, or even predominantly, a clerical phenomenon. The restriction is taken precisely because this was not so: it is too easy in attempting an integrated account to allow the voluble, visible clergy to speak for groups less well represented in documentary traces. We have a growing body of literature on the laity, divided in terms of social status and gender, the noble professors, men and women, and the middling sorts, and important work on the particular inflections that these positions bring to religious experi-

¹¹ P. Collinson, 'A Comment: Concerning the Name Puritan', *JEH* 31 (1980) pp. 483–8.

ence and activity.¹² For women (though not yet for men) we are slowly learning how concepts of gender and piety interact in a dialectic, each being modified by the other.¹³ It should prove possible to consider gender inflection for masculine piety, too, once we stop regarding it as the norm which is modified in feminine piety. For instance, bridal imagery drawn from Canticles is often seen as a particular resource sustaining a female piety. We might consider how this imagery, applied by male clergy to themselves, subverts normative gender categories.¹⁴ Similarly, we might consider how the piety of an exclusively male clergy interacts with gender assumptions. To give just one example, the common depiction of the preaching clergy as ‘breasts’ to their congregations, drawn from scriptural examples, might be seen to modify clerical masculinities.¹⁵

To some, a more glaring omission will be the relative neglect of clerical relations with these other groups – the clergy depicted here are an inward-looking group, rarely interacting with the laity, with the noble professors or with humbler saints. While this dimension is not wholly neglected, it should be stressed that the emphasis on clerical collegiality has perhaps overstated the autonomy of the clergy. Stephen Foster, for instance, has pressed a compelling case for changes in clerical ideas being driven by changes in relations with an increasingly confident and vociferous laity.¹⁶ One does not have to accept his argument uncritically to acknowledge the role of such relations in changes within godly culture.¹⁷

¹² J. T. Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry: the Great Puritan Families of Early Stuart England* (London, 1984); P. Seaver, *Wallington's World: a Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth Century London* (London, 1985); D. Willen, ‘Godly Women in Early Modern England: Puritanism and Gender’, *JEH* 43 (1992) pp. 561–80; P. Lake, ‘Feminine Piety and Personal Potency: the “Emancipation” of Mrs Jane Radcliffe’, *SC* 2 (1987) pp. 143–65.

¹³ P. Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500–1720* (London, 1993); A. Patterson, ‘Women’s Attraction to Puritanism’, *CH* 60 (1991) pp. 196–209; A. Patterson, *Female Piety in New England: the Emergence of Religious Humanism* (New York, 1992) esp. ch. 2; M. P. Hannay (ed.), *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works* (Kent, Ohio, 1985); E. Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women’s Writing 1649–88* (London, 1988) ch. 2.

¹⁴ See Willen, ‘Godly Women’, p. 568; C. W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987) pp. 28, 290–1; L. Pollock, *With Faith and Physic: the Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman Lady Grace Mildmay 1552–1620* (London, 1993) pp. 50, 75; for clerical adoption of this imagery, Robert Bolton, *Directions for a Comfortable Walk with God* (1636) p. 93; QUB Percy Ms 7 ff. 62, 174, 218, 313, 319, 334. For a stimulating discussion of German masculinity in the early modern period, see L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994) pp. 107–24.

¹⁵ For examples, D. Leverenz, *The Language of Puritan Feeling: an Exploration in Literature, Psychology and Social History* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980) pp. 29, 143–4, 216. See below, pp. 101–5, 126–8.

¹⁶ S. Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991).

¹⁷ I have attempted a case study in *Stephen Marshall and Finchingfield* (Chelmsford, 1994).

A second set of criticisms might arise from the geographical focus of this study. If it is read as a comprehensive account of clerical professors in the reign of Charles I, it will justifiably be slighted as a story overly dominated by Cambridge University, by Emmanuel College and by the south-east of England. Here, it must be made clear that this is a regional study, drawing upon East Anglia and the east Midlands, with all the advantages and disadvantages of the genre: detail, particularism, contextual depth and a very real temptation to generalise to regions less well known. Other regions may well show different patterns of sociability, may encourage other routes to different ecclesiologies, particularly when those other areas are less densely colonised by the godly. The dynamics identified here, for instance, bear little relationship to the experience of the youthful Richard Baxter.¹⁸

As the reader will become aware, I have found godly biographies a useful source, especially those in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* and in the collections of Samuel Clarke. Historians have, quite justly, been warned against taking these works as entirely trustworthy accounts, so it seems necessary to take a little time to contextualise them. We have been provided with an account of the genealogy of Clarke's works by Patrick Collinson, drawing attention to classical roots, the influence of John Foxe and to the emergence of godly hagiography, particularly in funeral sermons and 'lean-to' lives. For our purposes, it is most important to note the topos of 'moderation', both in spiritual and in ecclesiological terms, that Clarke's subjects were said to possess.¹⁹ Of course, it was a common trait in early modern religious rhetoric, advocates of the Church of England presenting themselves as followers of a *via media* between Catholicism and Sectarianism, Congregationalists of the 1640s as the occupants of a *via media* between authoritarian Presbyterians and chaotic Separatists. As Clarke's collections were aimed at an audience of the post-Restoration world, we may not be surprised to find that part of his polemic was to show the godly of the first part of the century to be loyal members of the Church of England, doing battle with Separatists on the one side and Romanists on the other. I have, I hope, been appropriately cautious in trusting Clarke in his accounts of pastoral practice and lifestyle, being more inclined to accept his encomia of godly ministers as Boanerges, the son of thunder, a panegyric applied by contemporaries, than as Barnabus, the son of reconciliation, absent from earlier accounts.²⁰ As with my use of Mather, I have tested his biographies against the evidence of earlier sources. The first part of the *Magnalia*, the biographies of the four Johns, Cotton, Norton,

¹⁸ J. M. Lloyd Thomas (ed.), *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter* (London, 1931) pp. 3–4, 6.

¹⁹ P. Collinson, "A Magazine of Religious Patterns": an Erasmian Topic Transposed in English Protestantism', in *Godly People: Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism* (London, 1983) pp. 499–525.

²⁰ See below, p. 101.

Davenport and Wilson, with an appendix devoted to Thomas Hooker, had been published in 1695 as *Johannes in Eremo*, with two goals in mind. As has been shown, the idea was to make it clear to William III that New England's rebellion against James II had not been an expression of latent Separatism in the colonies and a defence of the Mathers against the 'presbyterianising' tendencies of Solomon Stoddard in Massachusetts. These biographies were included, with significant changes in the *Magnalia*, the changes intended to serve an English dissenting audience in an attempt to give some historical flesh to the union of Presbyterians and Congregationalists supported by Mather's father, Increase Mather.²¹ Stylistically, attention has been drawn to Cotton Mather's constant attention to suffering and persecution experienced by his subjects, caused both by bishops and by ill-health, as a spiritual exercise revealing the convictions, patience and steadfastness of the godly.²² While it would be a sign of foolishness to look to a godly biographer for a wholly detached account of the clerical experiences of the 1630s, special care must be taken with Mather not to be seduced by what amount to sensationalist stories of suffering, ecclesiastical or physical, that characterised his mixture of epic and jeremiad. As the work was completed shortly before 1700, it fits into a similar polemic context as *Johannes in Eremo*.²³ Mather is concerned to portray a relative Jacobean consensus, disrupted by Romanising changes under Laud, coincidentally fitting into a framework surprisingly similar to the present historiographical context. Despite these reservations, *Magnalia Christi Americana* can be taken seriously as a source, evinced both by his voluminous correspondence,²⁴ and by the frequency with which his accounts find support in other sources, both godly and otherwise. Accordingly, I have used these sources, I hope constantly, with a reasonable amount of caution and borne in mind their limitations and dangers, relying upon their veracity only in areas where they are supported by other sources.

These criticisms, and I am sure there are many others, could be subsumed under a general heading. This book is not the answer to all the questions we have about Caroline religiosity among the godly. It is a contribution to an ongoing conversation, conducted in many different places, between many different people. That conversation shows no signs of abating, with or without my contribution. If I provide any new dimensions to that conversation, then this contribution will have been worthwhile.

²¹ P. H. Smith, 'Politics and Sainthood: Biography by Cotton Mather', *WMQ* 3rd ser. 20 (1963) pp. 186–206.

²² K. Halttunen, 'Cotton Mather and the Meaning of Suffering in the *Magnalia Christi Americana*', *JAS* 12 (1978) pp. 311–29.

²³ K. Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York, 1984) pp. 156–66.

²⁴ See K. Silverman, 'Cotton Mather's Foreign Correspondence', *EAL* 3 (1968–9) pp. 172–85.