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A Reflection¹

The Dichotomy of Monarchical and Atomistical National Religion

"The English nation grew increasingly more Protestant during the XVII century, while the monarchy moved ever closer to Rome."

The keen train spotter—spotting trains of thought rather than locomotives—will certainly spot a good deal of redundancy in this unequivocal statement, for it is, beyond doubt, a proclamation framed by the historian rather than the philosopher. The Stuarts—certainly some more than others—were Catholics not in the manner that Henry VIII took his mid-life faith, but rather in the manner that Elizabeth was always a Protestant. Similarly, the general population of the land

¹This is understood to indicate an *individualistic*, broad and loosely structured cogitation upon the specified topic. Accordingly, this paper will resemble a "school paper" only so much as it is printed on paper. Further, it might perhaps ramble, at times, like a boy scout in a wood on a fine Sunday afternoon.

viewed their faith as they viewed their nation: with pride.

We should perhaps initially note that religion was, to those of the 17th century, something cognate to sex to the present day paramour, charity to the philanthropist, money to the niggard: it was a serious business.

In the seventeenth century, Protestantism in England was as safe as houses: secure with a firm chronological and doctrinal and popular foundation. Within the larger European context, however, the established National religion was exposed to the rigours of Catholic tempest and seemed far from fixed. It is in this respect that we might tackle the monarchical populous split.

The English Restoration was no minor re-establishment of monarchy: it was rather a restatement of the national character. Regicide was abhorrent to most—we need only peruse the emotive power of *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* to gain some understanding of the general sentiment—and the execution of Charles I was an extreme act of an extreme sub-minority. The arrival of Charles II, therefore, was not only a restoration of the natural and Godly order, but, in effect, an appeasement of the national conscience; a way to bury the crisis of revolution once and for all. With so much at stake, it was no simple task to recreate the circumstances of the revolution, but this is precisely what Charles II and James II managed. It is certainly an oversimplification to suggest that this came about solely from religious discord, but similarly it is erroneous to suggest that this was not—if we might resort to

religious terminology—the “prime mover.” Charles II had spent much of his life upon the continent, and was, therefore, more a continental than an Englishman. In terms of religion, particularly, his views were consummately European: cosmopolitan and decidedly Catholic. It was therefore Charles II’s background that decided his religion, and his religion that decided his foreground. As the 17th century contemporary Locke would shortly surmise, man is a product not of divine planning, but of his environment—and the King is a man too. Where his father had been passive, Charles II was active; where his father had formed distant relations with Counter-Reformation characters, Charles II committed metaphorical incest. And yet the picture is not quite so clear, for Charles II was, in many respects, an acute and cunning politician: when in a position of weakness, as during his exile, religious belief was, to some small degree, malleable. In an attempt to win the throne of Scotland, still a separate realm notwithstanding the union formed by the monarch, Charles promised to submit to the Presbyterian Church. Similarly, despite the religion of his soul, the religion of his mortal self at the time of his ascension was officially Protestant.

Charles II played a dangerous game which he had no real chance of winning—and yet, religion being what religion was, we can hardly point the finger and blaspheme. His religion was not one of convenience, and yet it did seem, at least to Charles, convenient. There was a pragmatic side to this “Merry Monarch.” Charles II was the antipode of Puritanical stoicism,

and once the throne of England seemed decidedly his, a hunger for greater pleasure and greater power set in. The seventeenth century was much like ours: both these commodities required financing. Charles looked across the channel and saw his younger cousin, Louis XIV, immersed in both.

Louis XIV was as ambitious as he was arrogant: his empire building—beginning with the Dutch Republic and Spanish Netherlands—would be facilitated if England at least remained neutral. There was no relying upon the liberal or rather radical—as far as Louis was concerned—parliament; but Charles was a different kettle of Catholic fish. In actual fact, Charles, at that time out of touch with national sentiment, thought it quite possible to revive Roman Catholic ascendancy in England. A deal was made.

And so, if we fill in the gaps with common knowledge, it seems evident that the personal religious beliefs of Charles, born of a continental experience, walked arm in arm with his political as well as pleasurable aspirations. There was, in simple terms, neither an earthly nor heavenly reason why his religion should pose any problem.

James II continued what his brother had begun, though now Royal Prerogative moved like a juggernaut, carrying Catholicism and King towards the pit of Hell.

The country was still self-conscious, in 1685, of the absurdity that had taken hold during the Popish Plot period. At the same time, memory of regicide and the unfortunate state wrought by Cromwell and military rule spoke resoundingly of

the desirability of monarchy. James II came to the throne then in what can only be described as an atmosphere of blind faith, and no safeguards, no attempt to limit his authority were sought.

The savagery with which James dealt with Monmouth and his not so merry men was his first mistake, and the stench of the executed seemed all too reminiscent of the stench of Inquisition.

James wasted little time in affirming that he was indeed a Catholic King in every sense. There was a sincerity in his religious affiliation which is greatly reminiscent of Mary I, likewise the product of a Catholic upbringing; but the revolution and political and religious evolution had entirely change the context, and such sincerity now meant insufficiency. Exercising the royal prerogative of "Dispensing Power," James set about bestowing naval and military appointments upon Roman Catholics who were, in fact, precluded from such stations by virtue of the Test Act. Next, established judges were removed and similarly replaced by Roman Catholics. A flood of such appointment ensued, effectively changing a large part of the social substructure. All this, of course, met the approval of Louis XIV. Like his brother, James II looked to the French Court and saw the paradigm of power. Unlike his brother, he acted as if totalitarianism was already in the palm of his hand. The Declaration of Indulgence served to suspend entirely the Test Act, opening any office to any loyal Catholic. Charles had

made a similar move, saw that it was more than the nation could tolerate, and had withdrawn his declaration. The vanity and ignorance of James, the sincerity of his religious affiliation, the emulation of his cross-channel cousin would not allow for such a step backwards. Instead, he stepped blindly towards the breach.

There has always seemed a corporeal quality to Catholicism: it had marched through history along side monarchy, providing support and comfort and justification for absolutism. Indeed, absolutism and Catholicism, at least in the 17th century, seemed inseparable. James II had, as had his brother, good reason not only for remaining true to the faith, but for believing that it placed him on the winning side. Unfortunately, social evolution in all its manifold aspects meant that the game and the rules were now entirely new. The fabric of English society was woven ever more with the treads of Protestantism. Not only was it intertwined with the sense of National Character—what it was to be English, the concept of nation stemmed to a large degree from the Reformation of Henry VIII—but the stress upon individual responsibility was entirely meshed with the development of capitalism which was, in a manner, the expression of national development—as Adam Smith would shortly insist.

The explanations we have exposed are certainly the sort of stuff that historiographical treatise are made of. They might supply that scholarly demand for pattern and reason, though they seem, at the same time, an avoidance of the real issue,

for religious questions are philosophical questions before they are anything else, and it is only with a severe utilitarian bent that such problems might be approached from any other discipline. The historian then is half satisfied, and yet the philosopher has yet to see even the menu.