

A Protestant Vision: William Harrison and the Reformation of Elizabethan England

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William Harrison was a prominent Elizabethan intellectual, best known for his 'Description of Britain', included in the second edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587). He was also the author of a 'Chronology' of world history outlining the apocalyptic battle between the true, spiritual Protestant Church and the corrupt, worldly Catholic Church. Histories of such figures can be dry and dutiful affairs that only warrant the fleeting attention of the dedicated specialist. However, Dr Parry's rigorous and historically engaged analysis of the writings of his subject and his ability to contextualise Harrison's work within the Protestant culture of late Elizabethan England, distinguishes his monograph from run-of-the-mill studies and Cambridge are to be congratulated for reprinting this work fifteen years after its publication. *A Protestant Vision* demands to be read, even if one is not specifically interested in Harrison or in the progress of the English Reformation after John Bale. Parry shows how any account of Tudor intellectual culture must take into account the close relationship between religion, politics and historical writing, indicating that emphasising any one at the expense of the others will result in a distorted and partial picture.

A Protestant Vision consists of seven lengthy chapters and is divided into two parts, the first dealing with Harrison's view of history, the second with his vision of England. Chapter one, 'The Two Churches', shows how the enthusiastic young Protestant convert came to feel that if history was studied closely and scrupulously enough he would be able to establish a means of judging the successes and failures of the Elizabethan Church 'as part of the prophetic continuum of history' (p. 9). In this way Harrison was following in the footsteps of John Bale, who read the *Revelation* as a direct historical allegory of the progress of the evil Catholic Church and the saintly but persecuted True Church, which had only just been

able to re-establish itself after centuries of domination of the kingdoms of darkness. The implication was that Satanic elements were still lurking within the church: the problem was to identify exactly what they were.

Harrison was confident of his ability to achieve this monumental task. After all, his religion granted him an 'unchanging godly insight' that 'could resurrect the full experience of the earliest moments of time' (p. 20), ideal qualities for a historian. Historical analysis was also made straightforward by the continuum assumed here whereby 'the past and present had the same meaning' (p. 29), as history moved towards its final goal of Christ's return. On the one hand, Harrison's faith made him optimistic that everything pointed in the same direction and he could afford to ignore messy or stubbornly inconvenient evidence. On the other, his sense of the inadequacies of Elizabeth's church settlement and the compromises that she was prepared to make to preserve her position and protect the legacy of the Reformation, led to a certain amount of frustration and despair.

Chapters two and three provide a careful analysis of Harrison's 'Chronology', a work which attempted to elaborate the nature and design of God's will alongside the foolish and catastrophic errors of human society attempting to implement or thwart their maker. Harrison 'remained within the mainstream of apocalyptic interpretation which had been popularised in England by Bale' (p. 70). Rome had become generally known as the second Babylon by 961 AD, and Satan had been loosed into the world by 1001 AD. When the Lateran decree of 1215 gave the papacy power over secular rulers, Harrison argued that Satan had truly begun to dominate the world until properly resisted by the forces of the Reformation. Mainstream such interpretation may have been but Harrison was independent enough to take issue with the well-known view of John Foxe that the number of the beast, 666, referred to a specific year. Harrison, rather more sensibly, argued that the number signified a 'measuring rod' (p. 72) which would reveal how bad any particular event or action might be. Dr Parry also points out that Harrison made extensive use of Jean Bodin's *Methodis ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem* (first published in 1566) to expound theories of numerology and cosmic significance. That Harrison was able to ignore Bodin's absolutist political theories, conceived in the wake of the bloody French wars of religion and formulated in direct opposition to the Huguenot monarchomach writings which clearly did influence Harrison's thought, further indicates that Harrison was capable of ploughing his own furrow. Dr Parry makes this point but perhaps does not fully emphasise its importance.

The second section shows how Harrison applied his ideas to the state of Elizabethan England in his published work. Chapter four explains how he envisaged his ideal church, beliefs which marked Harrison out as a puritan within the church who felt that reforms had not gone far enough. In general Harrison was less content to accept that much church practice fell under the heading of 'things indifferent' than more moderate Protestants and he was keen to purge the church of grievous errors and other popish 'trash'. He felt that any remaining elements of the Church of Cain should be scrupulously removed and took a hard line on the vestments controversy, arguing that plain garments that did not separate pastor and flock too drastically were best fitted for worship in God's house. Nevertheless, Harrison was enough of a pragmatist to accept that opposition to Rome could not be built in a day and he accepted the use of the surplice in the short term. He was also prepared to tolerate the existence of bishops, although he clearly would have preferred to see the church less hierarchically governed (Dr Parry suggests that Harrison was confused and uncertain about this point, but is it not more likely that he felt the need not to isolate himself from the mainstream by arguing too idealistically and aggressively?). Harrison enthusiastically endorsed rites such as churching, believing that it was the duty of good Christians to multiply and so increase God's kingdom, whatever false emphasis might be placed on the holy nature of virginity as a Satanic trick to fool the devout. Overall, Harrison placed greatest emphasis on the word rather than the institution, a familiar enough Protestant preference.

Probably the most interesting chapters in the book are 5 and 6 which deal with Harrison's blueprint for a reformed prince and a reformed commonwealth. Although Harrison placed great emphasis on the law of nature in his discussions of numerology and prophecy – chapter 7 outlines his interest in Hermetic philosophy – he made a distinct separation between the natural world and the human world of politics and its institutions. Revelation was the key and such direct insight into the mind of God enabled the true believer to disregard ordinary observations and rules. Harrison's sense of value links him to Thomas More, a thinker he resembles, even though many of the Protestant philosophers and polemicists who influenced Harrison tried

their hardest to dismiss More as a false martyr obsessed with worldly rather than spiritual gain. Like More, Harrison seems to have feared compromise less than isolation in his attempts to argue for reform, and he also clearly felt that Christian revelation could and should override more mundane perspectives of the world.

However, this Christian rejection of the natural world paradoxically secularises political thought, or, at least, opens the way for a clear separation between politics and religion. The point that Dr Parry carefully makes is that admitting that human values and means of interpretation can determine political behaviour, rather than the natural world, means that political discussions do not have to be determined by religion alone. Rational argument can take place as a means of settling religious disputes about politics. As Quentin Skinner observed, 'the godly necessity of revolution' did not bind Calvinists to 'specifically Calvinist arguments' (p. 209) but enabled them to advance defences of their actions based on arguments derived from natural law theorists. Political behaviour could be separated from 'what the Scriptures revealed as essential for revelation' (p. 211). While John Ponet and Christopher Goodman, English Calvinists writing during the reign of Mary Tudor, had claimed that true believers should resist and overthrow the queen because of her hostility to Protestantism, Harrison had to make the rather less spectacular argument that he might be able to influence Elizabeth through the use of religious argument and turn her back to the true path. This is the central reason, one suspects, why Harrison's political significance has been overlooked.

Harrison was an undoubted radical, as Dr Parry observes: 'he *went further than the radical Calvinists on certain decisive issues* of historical interpretation, particularly the kind of magistracy sanctioned by the example of the True Church, and the relationship between imperial rule and true religion epitomised in the behaviour of Constantine' [my emphasis] (p. 200). To go further than radical Calvinists was indeed to go a long way and adopt a position that few monarchs would be happy to support especially if, in Dr Parry's words, his political position 'implicitly questioned the possibility of any harmonious relationship between continuous worldly monarchy and those who sought to foster true religion'. Such a position explicitly places sovereignty as the prerogative of the (godly) people, not that of the monarch. It resembles the arguments of the Scottish reformers such as John Knox, George Buchanan and David Hume of Godscroft, who felt it was their right and duty to curb and control their sovereign if he or she strayed from the straight and narrow. The most influential Huguenot treatise, *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* (1579), explicitly linked tyrannicide to Scotland through its (false) colophon, when the anonymous author claimed that the work had been published in Edinburgh (it was actually published in Basle) by Stephanus Junius Brutus, the Celt. A clearer link between the Protestant politics of early modern Scotland and Roman republicanism would be hard to imagine, the key idea being that opposition to the godless ruler resembled efforts to found the republic. And both, of course, necessitated the defeat of Roman tyranny. Buchanan, it might be worth noting, went further than anyone in arguing that the tyrant could be overthrown by a godly private citizen. Most monarchomachs argued that the designated magistrate had such powers and rights but not someone who did not even hold political office. Buchanan also felt that the Scots had made a cardinal error when they made their monarchy hereditary rather than elective. Harrison may have gone even further, because he 'believed that Israel committed a grave sin in demanding a king' (p. 217).

For Harrison, the key event was the elevation of Saul to the monarchy. While other commentators saw this act providing a Biblical justification of kingship – often one without restraints - Harrison concentrated on developing a pointed contrast between Saul the king and Samuel the prophet. Harrison sought to contrast the worldly ruler to 'the minatory prophet who enjoyed an intimate relationship with God' (p. 218), and who rejected tyranny. Israel started to look more like gentile nations when her people elected a king not ordained by God. In doing so Harrison came close to arguing that all government that was not directly inspired by God was evil and should be opposed (mirroring his position on the 'things indifferent' in church controversies), and that Israel's position as god's chosen nation resulted from the actions of her prophets and not her kings. Even Goodman and Ponet did not go so far as to suggest that monarchy itself might be inherently evil. Dr Parry suggests that Harrison's thoughts may well have been turned to the England he inhabited when he complained of Israel's elite 'defending ill-gotten "tenures"' through 'ungodly "police"'. (p. 223)

Nevertheless, Harrison did not, unsurprisingly, establish a clear plan of action in case his hopes of reform

failed to materialise. He did conclude that tyrants and ungodly monarchs richly deserved whatever gruesome fate they brought upon themselves, but he also argued that England could escape its nemesis 'by accepting the preaching which would reconstruct the godly commonwealth' (pp. 252-3). Even so, Harrison seems to have regarded political intervention as an onerous duty and his writings praise those prophets who chose to 'leade a private life farre from the court than to be nere the king and plaie the flattering hypocrite' (p. 263).

A Protestant Vision is not, of course, without some flaws. There are times when Dr Parry relies too heavily on the past conditional beloved by biographers (for example, 'Harrison must have been struck by the great personal relevance of Paul's life' (p. 5)), passing off reasonable speculations as though they were established fact. There are other times when obvious comparisons are neglected in favour of more striking links, a case in point being the attempt to place great emphasis on the relationship between Harrison's discussion of the Two Churches and that of John Hooker (in Chapter one). The analogy is not mistaken, but the passage reads as though the author were desperately trying not to relate Harrison to the much better-known figures, John Bale and John Foxe, whose writings on the tradition of the Two Churches have been analysed in exhaustive detail.

The major quibble I would have with the book is really a compliment to a cautious and diligent historian. There are times when Dr Parry seems to me to be rather too modest in the claims he makes for Harrison's significance and the radical nature of his work. Dr Parry opens his chapter on the political vision of William Harrison by castigating his subject and making an excuse for his apparent incoherence:

Despite his low opinion of princes in general, Harrison had dutifully to suspend his disbelief about Elizabeth's commitment to further reformation. This tension can be partly resolved by an examination of Harrison's views about England's relationship to the ideal godly commonwealth, but an element of incoherence must always be allowed for in his thought, since he belonged to that historical majority of individuals whose less than rigorous thinking allowed them to accept simultaneously a number of logically contradictory propositions. (p. 244)

It would be interesting to know whether Dr Parry would argue this case now. It has become an almost axiomatic assumption that Elizabeth was distrusted and criticised by virtually all of her articulate and intelligent subjects from the 1580s onwards. John Guy's edited collection, *The Reign of Elizabeth: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge University Press, in association with the Folger Shakespeare Institute; Cambridge, 1995), which outlined the sharp division between her successful early reign and the disastrous later one, has come to be accepted as a current orthodoxy. It may be the case that William Harrison was a more consistent thinker than Dr Parry has given him credit for and that he was one of the many writers who did not really place his faith in any monarch. If so, then further questions need to be asked. How typical or isolated was Harrison? Dr Parry notes that he was rather more excitable in his interpretations of events than many of his fellow historians and that he envisaged momentous happenings resulting from 'the most mundane happenings' (p. 121). It would be useful to know whether he stands out as an oddity in this or belongs to a wider tradition of historical exegesis. Dr Parry suggests that Harrison was 'eccentric' in his arguments and beliefs, and that he was unlike the humanists who sought to advise princes rather than to require them 'to vacate their thrones and reverently listen to the preachers of the Word' (p. 248). It may be the case that our conception of humanism and its possible manifestations has changed considerably since 1987, enabling a wider interpretation of its political spectrum as well as a breaking-down of the rigid separation between humanist and Protestant beliefs and practices.

And what of Harrison's politics examined in a wider context? Should we be adopting a British approach to the question of religious division and not just an English or European one? Was Harrison yet another figure who was more critical of female rule than he made clear? If so, did he want a strong male monarch on the throne to enforce God's will, or was he of a more republican cast, wanting the people to control the prince? Some historians cannot tolerate the 'r' word and cry 'anachronism' if anyone uses it to describe words or events before 1640. But a strong case can be made that George Buchanan, whose writings Harrison would have known (even though he does not feature in Dr Parry's book), was a republican because he used classical and Christian examples to argue that the people should have control over the monarch whose duty

was to administer the laws that they had established wisely and properly. Harrison's writings, so carefully and intelligently outlined by Dr Parry, suggest that he made similar connections, using his knowledge of Biblical history to argue that the godly rather than the monarchy should control the tenor of English life. Elsewhere Dr Parry argues that Harrison's 'eagerness to find some evidence of godliness in Elizabeth's actions also reflects his reluctance to face the logical consequences of his general assumptions about the problematical relationship between worldly princes and true religion' (p. 233). It is just as likely that it was fear and caution that enforced this uneasy compromise, as well as a pragmatic desire to play some part in inaugurating the godly kingdom in an imperfect world. That Harrison's manuscript writings contain much harsher criticisms of contemporary society and its religious failures – notably the self-aggrandising behaviour of the nobility – than his published works should surely come as no surprise.

A Protestant Vision is a fine work that makes important contributions to intellectual, religious and political history. Indeed, its singular achievement is to link these often disparate subjects together making it impossible to study the Reformation in isolation from early modern science or any debates on early modern political formations (to give one example, Thomas Smith, in his *De Republica Anglorum*, used Harrison's ideas alongside discussions of classical political forms). It is now up to other scholars to follow Dr Parry's lead and insights.

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