Patrick Collinson: *The Birthpangs of Protestant England*
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1.
The Protestant Nation

‘Our present task is to examine the peculiar characteristics of the English and the special circumstances from which these derive.’ Those are not my words. No English observer can be so detached and no historian ought to stand so far back from his canvas as to be able even to envisage such a task. Roger Anstey, for all his breadth of vision, would not have dreamed of anything so foolish. It is a German scholar (Levin L. Schücking, *The Puritan Family*) who is writing, in 1929, and who is struck by the English character as ‘a very special . . . character . . . sharply distinguished from its counterpart on the European mainland’, and which he assumes to be a protestant, or puritan character. Nevertheless while this book is not about the peculiarity of the English protestant character it may occasionally suggest why it should have been *thought*, and not only by foreigners, that it was a certain ‘very special character’.

The subject of this first chapter is national self-consciousness, a self-consciousness often directly attributed to the Protestant Reformation. We shall try to determine how far that attribution is correct. It was in 1500, well before any change in the national religion could have been discerned, that the Venetian ambassador diagnosed in the English advanced symptoms of ethnocentricity: ‘The English are great lovers of themselves, and of everything belonging to them; they think that there are no other men than themselves, and no other world but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner they say that "he looks like an Englishman" and that "it is a great pity that he should not be an Englishman".’ This rather Gilbertian pleasantry seems to have been a commonplace among foreign observers. The Scottish Parisian intellectual John Major, writing in 1520, reported that if the English abroad happened upon a man of parts and spirit they would say "tis pity he’s not an Englishman’.#1 The Protestant Reformation was *thought* to have made a great difference to national self-esteem, not least by those who were themselves caught up in it; and that fact, an illusion though it may have been, is important in itself. Whether the Reformation really made such a large difference, to the nation or to the local community, or to the family, is another question.

Herbert Butterfield dismissed both Renaissance and Reformation as mere ‘internal displacements’ in the civilisation of traditional Europe, their geographical equivalent being more like the Urals than the Himalayas, one might say. The critical transition to modernity did not lie in these events or processes, but came later. That was how it appeared from where Butterfield stood, there being no single vantage point from which the past is to be viewed and placed in perspective. But from where most Britons now find themselves the Reformation must seem even more remote and irrelevant to any current concerns. In reporting a recent agreement between Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians on the matter of ‘justification’, whether by faith only or by faith and works, the British Broadcasting Corporation had to assume even in a programme intended for churchgoers (‘Sunday’, 7 September 1986) that its listeners would have no familiarity with the issue and would not know why it was once important. Only in Ulster do such things still matter; and who wants to be reminded of that?

At the beginning of this century, when political life in Germany (and to some extent in this country) was still ordered along confessional lines, it was meaningful to conduct a debate about the Reformation and Modernity or, to quote the title of a little book by Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*. Troeltsch made it a general rule that ‘the relation of a religious system to civilization is always very complicated’ – and Max Weber did not dissent. So it was evident to Troeltsch that Protestantism could not be supposed to have paved the way directly for the modern world. On the contrary it amounted, at least at first, to a revival and reinforcement of the ‘authoritatively imposed Church-civilization’ of the Middle Ages. Subsequently its influence was felt in ‘indirect and unconsciously produced effects’, ‘accidental side-influences’. Both Weber’s still famous essay on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and R. H. Tawney’s once very famous *book Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* dealt, in very different ways, with the supposed side-influences of Protestantism, even with what might nowadays be called contraflows: specifically with respect to economic organisation and motivation.

Was the sense of nationality, nationalism even, another Reformation side-influence? Troeltsch thought not, and attributed this sentiment to two ‘completely modern’ forces: democracy and romanticism. However Christopher Hill, writing as recently as 1985, suggests that the intense religiosity of the Reformation, expressed in the single-minded devotion of the nation to a God who was assumed to be no less devoted to his people, effected the transition from the medieval kind of traditional and personalised fealty to the monarch to the modern conformity to the will of the impersonal state. This was to attribute to God himself that elusive quality in political responses and connections which Weber called ‘charisma’ and saw as transitional between traditional and legal-rational systems; and who could be more charismatic than the Almighty? ‘Loyalty to God was the mediating term between loyalty to the person of the King and loyalty to the abstraction of the state.’#2 That looks like a proposition still worth investigation.

I

On the day that war broke out my father heard a London preacher declare that if Hitler were to win he would tear up his Bible (no doubt as strong men occasionally rip up telephone directories). My father was so offended that he resolved never to darken the doors of that church again. The preacher’s rhetorical figure and my father’s adverse reaction to it are typical of the intricate relationship which the Protestant Reformation established, not so much between church and state (which it both simplified and complicated), or between religion and politics (which was and still is a can of worms), as between God and the Nation; and this is a relationship to which we have scant access except in the rhetoric of the publicist and preacher, in whose mouth it was occasional, opportunistic and even manipulative, playing upon minds, emotions and consciences which may well have been confused but are in any case closed to the historian. Prebendary Colin Kerr of St Paul’s Portman Square would not really have torn up his Bible if Germany had successfully invaded England in 1940. He said what he said to make the point that Hitler would not, could not, win. God would not let him. (But my Quaker father was offended, nevertheless, by the sheer presumptuousness of what he said.) Similarly, when seventeenth-century preachers threatened that God was about to desert the nation – ‘as sure as God is God, God is going from England’ – it is doubtful whether they really meant it. It was a way not only of dramatising the moral danger in which the country stood but also of underlining the special and ultimately secure relationship obtaining between God and at least some of his people. God would not really go from England. Would he?

Well, perhaps. In the Old Testament prophecy of Hosea God pronounces a terrible sentence upon Israel.#3 ‘Then said God, call his name Lo-ammi, for ye are not my people and I will oot be your God.’ Commenting on this text, on which numerous English preachers would presently expound, John Calvin said that this was ‘a final disowning of Israel . . . For God here abolishes, in a manner, the covenant he made with the holy fathers, so that the people would cease to have any pre-eminence over other nations . . . And then God wholly disinherited them’. But note Calvin’s ‘in a manner’. The great reformer seems to read the text as God’s ultimate stratagem in a last-ditch

effort to save a people whose disease was not so much incurable as 'almost incurable'. For, as English preachers would insist, all God's threatenings are conditional, 'to fall upon us if we repent not of our sins'. And so we come to Thomas Hooker, talking about God going from England on the eve of his own departure from Chelmsford, first for Holland and, later, for New England, where his destiny was to lay the foundations of Connecticut, a state of the Union. Hooker played cat and mouse with the very last English congregation he was ever to address: 'Shall I tell you what God told me? Nay, I must tell you on pain of my life . . . What if I should tell you what God told me yesternight, that he would destroy England and lay it waste . . . Well, look to it, for God is going, and if he do go, then our glory goes also.' But then, a moment or two later, he asked: 'How may we keep the Lord? It would be worth our labor.'#4

If the reader is already lost in this little thicket of minor prophecy let him take refuge in a simple statement of three words, words invoked more often than any others to encapsulate what is said to be the protestant perception of God's special dealings with the English nation: GOD IS ENGLISH. They appeared in *An harborowe for faithfull and trewe subiectes*, a book written in 1559 by John Aylmer, some time a tutor of royal and semi-royal personages (much beloved by Lady Jane Grey), a recent protestant exile and a future bishop of London. 'God is English' is a marginal note, pungently summarising the rhetoric of the text: 'Play not the milk sops . . . Show your selves true Englishmen in readiness, courage and boldness: and be ashamed to be the last. Fear neither French nor Scot. For first, you have God and all his army of angels on your side.' 'God is English' still has the capacity to shock as well as to amuse, although it was not an original proposition but a commonplace, an aphorism affirming that England was what a Caroline preacher later called 'the peculiar place of God'. Latimer pronounced: 'Verily God hath shewed himself God of England, or rather the English God'. Lyly proclaimed in *Euphues and his England*: 'The living God is only the English God'. And even the sober Archbishop Matthew Parker could remark: 'Where Almighty God is so much English as he is . . .'#5

In our enlightened age ofecumenical internationalism these sentiments are quoted in the lecture room to provoke a faint laugh from a jaded audience. It was a joke, or half a joke, in the sixteenth century, just as it raised a smile in the fourteenth century to say 'now the pope has become French, Jesus has become English'. This referred to a gold coin of Edward III which showed on one face the king standing in a ship, sword in hand, and on the other the text: 'But Jesus, passing through the midst of them, went his way'. But to say that something was a joke is not to say that it was not serious. If it really was the case that England was thought to be God's peculiar place, not just an elect nation but the elect nation, and if that idea was born out of the experience of the Protestant Reformation and its immediate consequences, then we have unearthed in protestant religious consciousness a root, perhaps even the taproot, of English imperialism.

From the taproot sprang a luxuriant growth which came to its literary climax in Milton's *Areopagitica* where the polemicist asked: 'Why else was this Nation chos'n before any other, that out of her as out of *Sion* should be proclaim'd and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all Europe?' – it being ever God's manner to reveal himself 'first to his Englishmen'. Elsewhere Milton wrote of England's 'precedence of teaching other nations how to live'. Was it this conviction which made mentally and morally feasible the acquisition of a global empire? The great F.W. Maitland, writing at a time when more than half the world was still coloured bright red or pink on the map, seems to have thought so. Commenting in *The Cambridge Modern History* on the enormity of events in 1559 and 1560, when the Reformation was gained in Scotland and regained in England, Maitland wrote that what was in the making was 'a new nation, a British nation'. 'The creed of unborn millions in undiscovered lands was being decided.' Addressing himself to the Commissioners of the Virginia Company in 1615, the London preacher Thomas Cooper suggested that the reason why the Gospel had been restored to the English nation was so that England might in her turn propagate it to 'our posterity and brethren, the nations far and near'. It was to this end that the precious seed had been watered with the blood of the Marian martyrs and cherished with the sunshine of the Elizabethan peace, so that 'the rude and savage nations', Ireland and Virginia, might receive 'this blessed light', making 'an inviolable league between those nations and our colonies': of which an early token was the newly baptised princess Pocohanios, 'lately married unto Jesus Christ and become ooe with you in the household of faith'.#6

Even someone who took the religious factor as seriously as Professor Roger Anstey would not have accepted the Miltonic vision of England's destiny as sufficient explanation for the British Empire. Quite apart from more material factors we are dealing with only one of several forms of national and historical consciousness. John Pocock reminds us that a cleric, a lawyer and a herald of arms will each recall a different historical past. When the Elizabethan map-maker John Speed wrote of his love for 'this our native land', 'the very Eden of Europe', his inspiration was not that of the theologian or preacher. 'Nation' itself is a symbolic rather than a real entity, attracting to itself various myths suggestive of a common past which may or may not bear relation to the real, or institutional, past.'#7

However, religious myths have often made the most critical contribution to the nation as an idea. This is manifestly the case with the Armenians, the Ethiopians and above all the Jews. And it has recently been argued that in its earliest beginnings the unity and coherence of the English nation in its occupation of this island, which is already a fact in the pages of Bede, and under that name of 'English' rather than the more likely 'Saxon', owed something to Pope Gregory the Great's continued enjoyment of his celebrated pun, 'non Angli sed Angeli'. 'England' was born because successive archbishops of Canterbury, notably Theodore, projected the papal vision of the ideal essence of England before God. For, says Patrick Wormald, 'nations are made not just by conquest and political manoeuvre but by shared ideals'.#8

Clearly, to start an account of the divinely ordained singularity of the English race at the Reformation is to start about nine hundred years too late. And if we want to trace the more immediate origins of the notion that God is English then the proper place to begin seems to be not the mid-sixteenth century but the mid-fourteenth, and the improbable successes of England in the earlier encounters of the Hundred Years' War. For it was then, in the age which produced Chaucer, when poets, politicians and preachers began to utter in English, that many of the mental attributes of the 'Protestant Nation' originated. It has been shown that the religious symbolism of incipient nationalism was deliberately borrowed from France, where it had been contrived as an ideology to correct centrifugal and divisive forces: something not called for by the more cohesive polity of medieval England, except in unusual wartime conditions. The first Avignon Pope, Clement V, had assured Philip the Fair that the French nation was 'like the people of Israel', 'a peculiar people'. So in 1377 the English Chancellor followed suit, pronouncing in the presence of the young Richard II that 'Israel is understood to be the heritage of God, as is England'. England's victories could be explained in no other way. But defeat had followed these improbable triumphs, and Bishop Thomas Brinton, like any Elizabethan or Jacobean preacher, was soon warning his hearers that 'God who was accustomed to being English will abandon us'. So it appears that Aylmer's slogan 'God is English', his appeal to the true Englishman to thank God daily that he had been born English and not as a French peasant, was not the voice of a new and protestant nationalism but an old rallying cry, uttered a matter of weeks before the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis ended what might be called the two hundred years' war between two ancient enemies. #9

Long before the Protestant Reformation, and for as Long after it, the idea that England was Like Israel of old, God's preferred and privileged people, was always accessible, and in wartime it regularly received a particular application from the pulpit. In 1756, at the outbreak of the Seven Years' War, a preacher asked rhetorical questions which could have been posed, almost word for word, four centuries earlier: 'Do not we succeed the Jews? . . . Are not we a chosen generation, a peculiar people, as were they?' So when the felicitous Jacobean preacher Thomas Adams declared that '*Israel* and *England*, though they lie in a divers climate, may be said right

Parallels: not so unfit in *Cosmographical* as fit in *Theological* comparison', he was merely giving a distinctively baroque expression to a commonplace inherited from the past and consigned to the future.#10

II

At this point one may well ask whether there is anything of interest to be said by a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historian about the *Protestant Nation* as such. There is. And it is more interesting than the naive and chauvinistic triumphalism of 'God is English', seeping through the pages of A.L. Rowse to add bright colours to the two-dimensional conventions of romanticised Tudor history. The Protestant Reformation extended and intensified the religious sense of English nationhood, according to Christopher Hill sublimating and idealising vulgar Elizabethan nationalism. But it aiso inhibited and confused that sense, turning it inward and ultimately converting it into a disturbing and divisive as much as a uniting force.

We shall deal later with the inhibition and the confusion, but first the intensification. Behind the all too well-worn texts (Shakespeare's 'this blessed plot – this England', Queen Elizabeth's own 'the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too') there are numerous less familiar sources in the religious vein which are remarkable for the intensity of their patriotic self-consciousness. 'OhEngland! England!', or 'Alas England', are constant refrains. The first-generation Protestant Thomas Becon was stirred by Henry VIII's invasion of France in 1543 (the expedition which launched and sank the Mary Rose) to exclaim how every nation 'is led even of nature with such an unspeakable loving affection toward his country'. He even quotes Horace's text with, for us, its 1914 resonance: *'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'*, and he rhapsodises over 'England, England, mine own native country . . .' Two eventful generations later the Banbury preacher William Whateley (called 'the roaring boy of Banbury') exulted: 'Ah England! Gods Signet, Gods Jewel, which he hath fostered as tenderly and adorned as graciously as ever he did Judea, England, the one only Nation, almost, that doth openly and solely profess the true Religion of God!'#11

And here the reader must excuse a little in-fighting. Among historians of seventeenth-century England there has been a running debate about the relative strength of provincial and national loyalties. For a time Professor Alan Everitt of the Department of Local History at Leicester made it a doctrine that whereas the senses of national community and county community were both gathering strength in this period, the stronger of the two sentiments was located in the county community. England was an informal federation of counties, and when a man spoke of his country he meant not England but, for example, Kent, and probably either East Kent or West Kent, for the frontier of the Medway separated two distinct communities, two 'countries'. More recently the fluid ambiguity of the term 'country' has been acknowledged. It could and did mean various things, and this was not so much a source of confusion as something positively exploited in political rhetoric, as the speaker moved imperceptibly from local to national issues.#12 But the protestant pulpit knew nothing of these ambiguities, had never heard of the county community. To the preacher 'my country' invariably meant England: realm, commonwealth, nation, people. The reason is obvious. The Bible, to which he was riveted, knew nothing of counties: it knew only of a nation, Israel, and of a city, Jerusalem. The classical authors, who were another source of inspiration, also wrote of a transcendent rather than a deliberately localised patriotism. So protestant learning and pulpit oratory were powerful forces making for the transcendence of more limited loyalties, and for attracting the minds and emotions of the hearers towards identification with the national community.

How is this intensification of religiously inspired national feeling to be explained? Henry VIII and Elizabeth are, of course, a large part of the answer in their assertion of an almost unreserved regal authority and dignity, hedged about with divinity. The king, in Tyndale's words, was 'in the room of God and representing God'; the royal supremacy was not merely a constitutional principle but an ideology, graphically expressed on the engraved title-page of Henry VIII's Great Bible, where the monarch is seen handing out the Scriptures to his subjects, clerical and lay, male and female, who respond with shouts of 'Vivat Rex', 'God Save the King'. Under Elizabeth the royal arms in every parish church literally usurped the place of honour hitherto reserved for the crucifix; the official sermons or homilies of the newly nationalised Church of England asserted that rebellion is worse than the worst government of the worst prince; Elizabeth, the apotheosis of Tudor monarchy, the crown of godly womanhood and the best of all conceivable princes, represented a paradox of the kind which the Bible delights in, her strength made perfect in weakness. She was described by a court chaplain as 'the peerless Queen of the World' and by a preacher at Canterbury as the corner-stone which the builders had rejected, which was to identify her with King David and even with Christ himself. Much of this was Accession Day rhetoric: 'Adore November's sacred seventeenth day!' But that 17 November should be considered the holiest date in the calendar was itself telling.#13

All this we could take for granted, had some medievalists not doubted how much novelty there was in the royal supremacy and in the Henrician reconstitution of church and state. Long before he thought of breaking with Rome Henry VIII had changed his coronation oath to read that he would maintain the rights and liberties not of 'Holy Church' but of 'the holy Church of England'. The iconography with which the protestant monarchy of Elizabeth I was projected incorporated much late medieval symbolic language and has been called 'a reincarnation of the iconography of late medieval queens'. At the Council of Constance which convened in 1415 (the year of Agincourt!) the English delegation had strongly asserted the claims of the English church and nation, 'the famous and undoubted English nation', and had greeted French attacks on these pretensions with 'whistles and groans'. And what was the first of their claims? Why, that England had never left the obedience of the Roman Church.#14

But now the king, in matters divine no less than secular, was, in Tyndale's words, to 'give accounts but to God only'. And the initial, legislative repudiation of the papal nexus steadily widened in its implications until anti-catholicism, founded on the formal proposition that the Pope is none other than Antichrist, became the sheet-anchor-of England's nationhood. The prince's pre-eminence and splendid isolation on earth was matched in Heaven by God's unrivalled sovereignty. No more saints. If God was 'mere English', the English now had no god but God.

While investing the monarch with reflected divinity the Reformation charged with moral significance all other authorities and political duties, all normative structures of the social order: magistracy, certainly, but also the household and its head. In Elizabethan England moralistic discourse was pervasive, extending far beyond what might be considered a suitably religious context. An almanac of 1564 (the most popular and ephemeral of early printed literature) forecast a wet autumn and added: 'Therefore sleep no longer in sin but awake, awake, for it is high time'. And it was England which was to awake, for the nation itself acquired a highly personalised ideal and moral character which enabled it to be apostrophised – Oh England! – and held to moral account.

An almost sufficient explanation for that was the exploration of the Bible, now more or less freely if patchily available in the accessible and singularly authentic vernacular of Tyndale and the other translators. This was a collection of texts of which the protestant preachers could soon assume, at least on the part of that minority of the population which came within the sound of their voices, a sophisticated and resourceful knowledge, and of the Old Testament as much as of the New – perhaps especially of the Old Testament. So it was that the Israel of the Old Testament became a familiar paradigm for England, Jerusalem for London. Every biblical type and figure of God's people

was now applied to England, *ad nauseam*. England was a vineyard, a vine (but bringing forth wild grapes), a lodge in a garden of cucumbers. The Christ who wept but once over Jerusalem was forever weeping over London. Everything was turned to account. St Paul had expressed reluctance to leave Corinth. So when a bishop of London was translated to York he told his London flock: 'The city is like, the people are like, my departure from you is like'.#15 These people were living, in a sense, in the pages of the Bible. Theirs was a mode of discovering a shared identity which was indirect and is somewhat mysterious to us, but it was as meaningful as those other processes of England's self-discovery which involved chroniclers, antiquarians, topographers, surveyors and map-makers. Personal identity, we are told by developmental psychologists, emerges through a process of successive crises which effect degrees of detachment from parental ties leading to the achievement of personal autonomy. In the case of the nation we may observe a reverse process: an increasingly intimate involvement with God, cemented in the bonds of a covenant made between him and his people.

For political and social purposes the covenant was the most protean and formative of all biblical principles. In a late Elizabethan sermon a Bristol preacher declared: 'Blessed is Israel, because the Lord is their God, and blessed is England, because the Lord is their God'. That was to go beyond a merely rhetorical commonplace, Thomas Adams's 'right parallels'. It was to allege two equally covenanted nations, virtually fused in one in the single bond sealed between God and his covenanted people.#16

These discoveries were not made in a vacuum but in the context of the threatening international situation in which England was caught up from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, and which differed from all earlier international crises in that its character was more ideological than dynastic, and as much an internal as external source of perceived danger, involving plots, subversion and the threat of terrorism. A process of ideological politicisation can be traced from the unpopular Spanish marriage of Mary, and from the excessive Spanish-style repression of heresy carried out in her name. A broad-sheet published before the burnings had even begun invited God to 'defend thy elect people of England from the hands and force of thy enemies, the papists'. Thereafter Protestantism, originally suspect as a foreign importation, began to be identified with the national interest, Catholicism with all that threatened that interest. Apparently the gunpowder plotters of 1605 imagined that they were doing something patriotic, but their motivation would have seemed to contemporaries as incomprehensibly suspect as that of the Baader Meinhof Gang in our own century. As Professor David Loades has remarked of the cementing of the alliance of Protestantism and patriotism in the long hot summer of Elizabeth's reign: 'Nothing succeeds like success'.#17

III

So why suggest that protestant religiosity inhibited and confused the sense of England as special and divinely elect? Before engaging with that question we must first introduce into the discussion, and not before time, the large figure of John Foxe and his truly monumental 'Book of Martyrs'. For an account of the Protestant Nation- without Foxe is indeed Hamlet without the Prince. But Foxe is himself a complicating factor.

Foxe's Book of Martyrs, more properly *Actes and monuments of these latter and perilous dayes touching maners of the Church*, began life as a modest but tendentious historical essay on recent ecclesiastical history, that is an account of events since the time of Wyclif. But it grew through successive editions (1563, 1570, 1583, 1587) into a work of universal scope and stupendous length, twice as long as the Bible but treated as a kind of appendix to the Bible, a 'book of credit, next to the Book of God' and, like Scripture, read systematically or 'throughly'. In the 1620s it was said of a certain Exeter worthy that in this way he had read the Bible 'ten times over', but the Book of Martyrs only 'seven times over'. Families used it to record births and other notable events, as they would use the Bible.#18

Following certain leads given by the ex-Carmelite John Bale, a more precocious, original and scholarly writer, Foxe made of fifteen hundred years of church history a coherent and meaningful plot, its ground bass the unrelenting warfare between the false church, visible, commanding and apparently flourishing, and the true church, depressed almost out of sight, a 'secret multitude of true professors'. This struggle consisted of aggressive persecution on the one hand and patient suffering on the other, the one a sure sign of error (for 'they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain'), the other of truth. This was an account of history which we call apocalyptic, and it was apocalyptic in a double sense. The notion that truth, far from being extinguished by persecution, vindicates itself in suffering, derived from the apocryphal and inter-testamental literature of which the Apocalypse of St John, or the Book of Revelation, was a late example. And from these same prophetic and almost cabbalistic sources, extending back to the Book of Daniel, Foxe, like so many other speculative theologians hooked on prophecy, derived the principles, including mathematical principles, with which to read into history a meaningful pattern and even a programme. Thus Foxe speculated on the Millennium, a notion derived from Revelation of a thousand-year epoch in which the force of evil would be restrained, allowing the Church of God a measure of peace and prosperity; and on the figure of Antichrist, named as such only in the Johannine epistles but easily connected with other figures and types to be found in the Apocalypse, including the Beast, the Dragon and the Woman, the Whore of Babylon. By the time that Foxe wrote, and certainly by the period in which he was so widely read, it was more or less consensual among English Protestants that the Roman papacy was to be identified with Antichrist, the Roman Church with 'Babylon' or 'Babel'.

The historical scenario on which Foxe eventually settled, after some false starts, associated the Millennium with the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century and identified it with the Peace of the Church which followed. But it envisaged Satan struggling free from his chains long before the literal completion of the thousand years, a process demonstrated in the regressive degeneration of the Church from the truth and in the escalating claims of successive popes to earthly domination, accompanied by intensified persecutioo of God's saints. Repression of the truth and faithful witness to it both reached a climactic period at the end of the millennial age with the emergence in England of John Wyclif and in Bohemia of Jan Hus, who was burned by the Council of Constance. Of Wyclif, Foxe wrote: 'What time there seemed in a manner to be no one little spark of pure doctrine left or remaining, this foresaid Wyclif by God's providence sprang and rose up, through whom the Lord would first waken and raise up again the world'. Thereafter persecution had not relented and Foxe's account of it, especially in England, progressively thickened as his narrative approached more recent times, culminating in hundreds of pages of documentation, eye-witness description and polemical journalism devoted to the Marian burnings, arousing public excitement by the naming of persecutors still living and victims whose children and grandchildren were proud to be 'of the stock of the martyrs'. William Whateley of Banbury would mention to his father-in-law in 1623 'that great happiness which God hath bestowed upon you, in that you are the son of a father whom only the death of his persecutors and of Queen Mary . . , did hinder from being crowned with the most honourable crown of Martyrdom' – 'as Master *Fox* hath set down'.#19

While Foxe continued to engage in the immense labour of extending his book, going weekly to his publisher John Day on Monday mornings, persecution continued unabated on the Continent, reaching its grisly climax in France in 1572 in the St Bartholomew massacres. However in England the peace of the Church had been restored by Elizabeth, a second Constantine but herself a near-martyr in the reign of her sister; and it was Foxe who turned that story into an abiding legend, to be reworked for years to come by ballad writers and dramatists.

If you know not me, ran the title of one of these plays, *you know nobody*. Constantine himself had been a kind of Englishman, or so Foxe believed, being the son of a British princess and proclaimed emperor on British soil.

So much for Foxe's book. What about its effect on the national consciousness? In 1963 the American literary scholar William Haller published an elegant and persuasive study, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation*. This argued that Foxe was the principal architect of the conviction that the English were a people 'set apart from all others', an explanation in himself for Milton's famous obsession about 'God's Englishmen'. Haller was all too persuasive and excessively influential. He was primarily a Milton scholar and so began his investigation of Foxe on the basis of Milton's rather extreme statement that if Wyclif and Hus had not been silenced there would have been no need for Luther and Calvin: 'the glory . . . had been completely ours'. There is of course no way of knowing how many readers of Foxe derived from their reading a sense that England was not merely *an* elect nation but *the* elect nation. However it was not the lesson which Foxe intended to teach.

In representing the Book of Martyrs as a lens which brought into sharp focus England and its divinely appointed reformers and godly monarchs, while blurring the landscape to either side, Haller was responsible for some distortion and he made altogether too much of the attention naturally and properly paid to things English by an English author, mindful of his English readers. If Foxe celebrated Wyclif, he praised above all the German Luther whom 'the Lord did ordain and appoint . . . to be the principal organ and minister under him, to reform and re-edify again the desolate ruins of his religion'. That Luther was known to the English religious public as an edifying spiritual writer was very largely due to Foxe, who was active in promoting editions of some of the great reformer's most affecting writings. In *Acts and Monuments* Foxe's subject was not so much England as the Church, to which he attributed a universal and mystical identity, the whole body of the elect scattered over the face of the earth. In a huge Latin commentary on the Apocalypse on which he was labouring in his last and declining years, and which Haller evidently found it possible not to read, there were no apocalyptic references to England as a nation but an explicit denial that the Church was limited to any single country. And far from envisaging a glorious terrestrial future for the English Church under its new Constantine and her successors (still less the British Empire) Foxe evidently expected the imminent return of Christ and the end of all things, since he wrote towards the end of what he believed to be the final three hundred years of history, which had begun in 1294.#20

Other Elizabethan Protestants had less confidence than Foxe that the rationale and ultimate destiny of history could be deciphered from the cabbalistic mysteries of biblical and apocalyptic arithmetic. Although they knew that history had a beginning and believed that it would have an end, they seem to have shared with the twentieth century the conviction that all the ages in between have been, in a sense, 'equidistant from eternity', sharing a common significance. In effect they were working their own variations on St Augustine, for Augustinian all these philosophies of history were. William Harrison was an Essex country parson who had dealings with Raphael Holinshed and others of his circle, and he wrote a famous *Description of England* – more national self-consciousness. The *Description* seems to have been written almost without method and is apparently bereft of any philosophy of history. But Dr Glyn Parry has now shown that Harrison thought more penetratingly and expansively even than Foxe on the meaning of the past, incorporating his ideas into a grandly conceived 'Great English Chronology' and other 'Reflections'. In Harrison's scheme the conflict between Cain and Abel, personifying the principles of falsity and truth, or 'Gentilism' at war with Israel, 'the line of the right wise', had continued ever since the beginning and still raged, not only between Protestant England and its popish enemies but also within the Elizabethan Church itself. Consequently Harrison was less disposed than Foxe to recognise Constantinian figures as instruments of divine providence, or the earthly dispensations over which they ruled as 'true', and even more suspicious than Foxe of the sense of false security which such potentially 'triumphalist' notions might encourage. Far from attributing to 'Constantinian' England any special role in a divine historical plan, Harrison seems to have regarded his country's history as teaching the same lessons which the devout of other nations ought equally to learn from their own historians.#21

Since most of us belong to a particular nation and look out at the world from a certain vantage point, ethnocentricity will creep in, even through the back door. A Puritan of Bury St Edmunds appeared to be critical of his country, certainly of his queen, when he caused to be inscribed below the Royal Arms in his parish church the words from the Book of Revelation: 'Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth'. He was hanged for his pains. The offensive words were first uttered by the Holy Spirit to the angel of the Church of the Laodiceans and they were later applied to the Church of England by the post-Foxeian apocalyptic writer Thomas Brightman.#22 Yet there is more than a hint in Revelation that if only Laodicea will deny its wealth and acknowledge its true poverty and wretchedness it will become truly rich and perhaps the brightest star in the ecclesiastical firmament. Why was the Spirit so harsh in its criticism of Laodicea? 'As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent' (Revelation 3:19).

But even in Foxe any ethnocentric enthusiasm for what he admittedly called, in a striking phrase, 'this my-country Church of England' was tempered by the sense that the Church achieved its truest identity above nationality and beyond history, as a mystical entity. All English Protestants, Foxe included, were internationalists, conscious of their common identity with the other Reformed churches of Europe. Although this is to compare the incomparable, their international sense was probably more acute, and certainly no weaker, than the sense of the English nation at the Council of Constance. In the very same breath in which he prayed for victory in Henry VIII's last campaign Thomas Becon had expressed an equal concern for 'the Christian public weal', which was not England but more or less equivalent to Christendom. The continual wars vexing foreign parts ought, wrote Becon, 'to move any true English heart to have pity and compassion upon the christian brothers, dwell they never so far from us, seeing that we be knit together in one faith'. In Mary's days the English protestant leadership had found safety in continental exile. Under Elizabeth they returned the compliment by receiving the refugees of the French and Dutch troubles, religious solidarity transcending traditional xenophobia. In Canterbury protestant Walloons made up more than a third of the population, as did the protestant Dutch in Norwich. Even in the late twentieth century no British city has a higher proportion of immigrants in its population. William Bradshaw wrote: 'Touching the word *foreign*, those Churches being all of the same household of faith that we are, they are not aptly called foreign'. Calvinism functioned both in the mind and to some extent in the practice of voluntary aid and relief as an international organisation in a manner which anticipated some aspects of our own century's history. Geneva was its Moscow, the Netherlands and in the 1620s the Palatinate its Spain, battle grounds for opposed ideologies, inviting the active intervention of sympathisers from other parts of Europe.#23

Paradoxicaily it was the great hope placed in England by continental Protestants at the time of the Thirty Years' War which served to foster the millenarian idea that England had a manifest destiny as an elect and (to use the American phrase) redeemer nation. On the eve of that war a London preacher told his audience that 'this little island', 'this angle of the world', had been 'the sanctuary of all the christian world'. 'Have not all the neighbour nations taken hold of the skirts of an Englishman?' Some years later the same man thought it a 'wonderful mercy' that England not only enjoyed peace, 'environed round about with such tempestuous seas', but was able out of its abundance to entertain and relieve its distressed neighbours.#24 It was Milton's bitter disappointment at England's subsequent failure to fu1fi1 this promise and play its proper part which fuelled, as a negative reaction, his sense of England's 'precedence'. 'How should it come

to pass?' he wrote in 1641, at the height of the reaction against Archbishop Laud's crypto-catholic isolationism, 'that England having had this grace and honour from God to be the first . . . should now be the last? . . . We are no better than a Schism from all the Reformation.' So Protestantism complicated the religious sense of nationhood even while it intensified it.

IV

It would be pointless to deny that that sense was heightened by the Elizabethan experience of living dangerously, which was in a general sense an apocalyptic experience, since the source of danger was located in the papacy and the papacy was identified with Antichrist. But apocalyptic ideologies in the more developed and formal sense, involving the construction of elaborate philosophies of history, have been exaggerated as a source of national self-consceousness. Modern intellectual historians are fascinated by these ideas, but we cannot assume that even the regular reader of Foxe shared such interests, at least until the Civil War stimulated the taste of the religious public for the exotic and obscure in biblical prophecy. Much more persuasive was what we may call the ordinary prophetic mode of religious discourse, of which much less has been made in recent scholarship. This was a perception of God's relation to history which was not at all historical in any progressive sense, since it presented Israel and England, or Israel and the Church as if contemporaries, *sub specie aeternitatis*. The very fact that the early protestant preachers reinvented the critical role of the biblical prophets was in itself important. So Becon in his *Invective Against Swearing* quotes Isaiah with relish: 'Cry, cease not'. He is echoed by a Jacobean preacher, similarly inspired: 'Cry aloud .. . and outcry the crying sins of England'.#25 As these words imply, the prophetic mode required that the preacher address his hearers not as individuals, nor as a congregation, but as standing for or representing the nation. The appeal also envisaged an active, willing response. Apocalyptic utterance pointed to divine intervention; prophetic discourse spoke of what a nation could do to help itself.

But if prophetic preaching intensified the nation's sense of its own identity, it also sought to subdue it and drive it inwards, for by its very nature prophetic discourse was anything but triumphalist. It was castigatory, almost never congratulatory, feeding on catastrophe or threatened catastrophe. England was compared to Israel in its disobedience, Israel under judgment: rarely to Israel in its prosperity, except when prosperity was denounced as spiritually hazardous and the cause of national apostasy. The argument (such as it was) never varied, so that one marvels at the resilience of minds and consciences which must have been exposed to it on so many occasions. Like Israel, England had been uniquely favoured. God had not dealt so with any nation. As one writer put it: 'You are at this day, and long have been, the astonishment and wonderment of all the world'. Another spoke of the English *now* God's people, as the Israelites were *then* God's people. But the identification consisted in the scale and enormity of the nation's sins, for like Israel England had been faithless, careless, unthankful. 'We seem to have entered into a contention with the Almighty, whether he shall be more merciful or we more sinful'. That was why England had suffered God's repeated warnings and why, if repentance did not come in time, worse plagues were like to follow. It is always the land, the whole land, which is threatened, an inevitable deduction from the entire corpus of Old T'estament prophecy. A Jacobean preacher spoke vividly of every man under his vine and fig tree 'from *Kent* to *Kentyre*, from the *South of England* to the *North of Scotland*', all at peace but all under judgment.#26

The only variation is in the nature of the sins denounced. And it is to be noted that sins are the target, rarely institutions. This was preaching which assumed and underwrote the social and political order, offering no challenge to it. There may have been a perceptible shift from the 'social' sins complained of in Edward's days, in a word 'covetousness', to the 'moral' and personal offences which exercised the Jacobean pulpit: drunkenness, whoredom, Sabbath violation, swearing. Some would see this as indicative of a significant change, from a bias towards the poor to a measure of prejudice against them, as the new religion ceased to be new and became more closely associated with the social order and with the interest of social control. However moral and personal sins, which in any case were by no means confined to the poor; had been denounced from the early days of the Reformation, not to look to earlier times still. And it would be a mistake to regard such offences as occurring in some privatised area of moral and sub-criminal behaviour, a 'soft' and uncontroversial area for the preacher to penetrate and exploit. So it may be in a liberal society like the twentieth-century United States. But in the perception of thoroughly illiberal Elizabethan England these were matters of lively public concern. To indulge such sins was to expose the entire community to divine retribution; to complain of them was to court extreme unpopularity as a 'busy controller'.

Among other offences, swearing, what the author of *Englands summons* called 'this infernal dialect and language of the Devil', was considered the most dangerous sin of all because, like some sinister cloud of nuclear fall-out, it threatened the whole nation which tolerated it in its streets. So after the sharp earthquake which struck the south-east of England on 6 April 1580 the pulpits had a field-day against national apostasy. And not only the pulpits. An opportunistic and mostly scientific treatise on the cause of earthquakes, published within a week of the event, concluded: 'Surely it cannot be without the special finger of God'. It was as if God should have nodded his head to all the sermons preached in the last twenty-one years. Others dramatised those lost years. 'The Lord hath come to his fig tree of England not three but almost twenty-three years, and behold, yet he findeth little fruit.' A Coventry chronicler recorded the earthquake and added, with a nice sense of irony: 'This year was a disease all the land over, called speedy repentance'. On 11 November 1618 the appearance of the phenomenon we know as Halley's Comet induced a similar effect. It was the 'stately tongue of Heaven .. . that prodigious star', God's lecture in the sky; its likely effect was 'Death, Drought, Dearth, Winds, Wonders, Wars'.#27

As the distance in time separating the preacher and his congregation from Elizabeth's restoration of the Gospel increased, so the growing contrast between God's mercy and the nation's indifference offered ever greater rhetorical scope:

> Oh the oaths and blasphemy in our Nation! O, the contempt of Gods word and gospel in our Nation! O, the pride and idleness in our Nation! O, the drunkenness, whoredom and filthiness in our Nation! If Rome or Constantinople abounded with swearing and cursing, who could look for better there? If France and Italy were full of whoredom, who could expect other in those corners of popish darkness? But England, Ah England! Gods Signet, Gods Jewel . . . I say England aboundeth in all these sins. What shall we say or do? Whither shall we turn ourselves . . . What? Swearing in England? Cursing in England?#28

V

And so we return to all those sermons on Hosea, the text where we began. 'Then said God . . . ye are not my people, and I will not be your God . . . The Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.' Taking account only of those which found their way into print, sermons or courses of sermons on this prophetic scripture were preached in 1609, 1612, 1613, 1616, 1617 – and so on. Hosea Chapter 4 was a favourite springboard for a Paul's Cross sermon, for this was a national pulpit, the nearest thing that the age offered to broadcasting.

And presently Thomas Hooker's flock in Chelmsford would be assured, on the basis of a text in Jeremiah supplemented by information directly vouchsafed to the preacher, that 'as sure as God is God, God is going from England'.#29

Here was a great contradiction and some confusion. The more the Gospel had been preached, the more persuasive the preacher and the more unmistakable the signals of warning and mercy (1588 and the Armada, 1603 and the plague, 1605 and the Gunpowder Treason), the more obdurate was the nation's indifference, or so it seemed. Things were worse and not better. But the confusion was potentially deeper than that. For if so much of the nation so consistently rejected God, in what sense could it be said to be his people at all? But could a nation which God had chosen reject him? And would God, could God, abandon a nation which he had once taken to himself? The evidence was perhaps discouraging to the thesis that God ever had chosen England. But was the sentence pronounced by Hosea against Israel a final sentence? And who or what was Israel: the entire nation, or only a faithful remnant within the nation? At this point the doctrine that God is English foundered on the contradictions between the principle and claims of the all-inclusive national Church, and the religious self-awareness of the godly people, the virtuoso minority whose practice of religion was prodigious. In fact more was involved in that shipwreck than Aylmer's blithe motto. It was the English Reformation and the Reformed English Church itself which struck this reef of contradiction, and we call the resultant disaster the English Civil War.

The difficulty in which the religious public, and especially the prodigiously religious public, now found itself was both existential and exegetical, as preachers wrestled with difficult texts, or exploited the ambiguities the texts contained, for immediate pastoral advantage. Viewed simply in terms of the observable situation, there was a problem in that the status of Christian and Protestant which was attributed by law and by courtesy to the entire population was in practice actively appropriated and enjoyed only by some, probably a minority of the whole. That faithful, godly, 'conscionable' minority, fortified by the conviction that among its members were God's own elect children, distanced itself mentally and to varying extents in social practice from the 'reprobate', 'carnal' majority. And yet their preachers continued, as public officers and spokesmen of a national and established Church, to exhort the whole population, entire parishes, to repentance, even while they administered the sacraments, in effect, to all and sundry. George Widley was insistent: 'Every hill is Sion, every river is Jordan, every country Jewry, every city Jerusalem'. 'Ail must be compelled unto the true religion.#30

The exegetical difficulty consisted quite simply in the fact that 'Israel' served as a paradigm both for the Church, as a mystical and universal society, and more literally for the English nation (and other nations), often represented as if it stood in the same relation to God as the Jewish nation of old. And to confuse the matter still more the nation was also the Church, a local and visible expression of the universal company of the faithful and bearing a certain problematical relation to that wider and invisible company.

It might have been less troublesome if the preachers had identified England (or London) with Nineveh, since Nineveh, metropolis of the Assyrians, was a gentile city which had nevertheless responded with alacrity to the preaching of the prophet Jonah. Nineveh consequently prefigured the gathering into the Church of the nations, of which England was one. Christ himself had used the example of its repentance to shame his Jewish contemporaries. But English preachers made only occasional and incidental use of this story, for example to make the point that if Nineveh repented in three days after a single sermon, one might reasonably expect more success after twenty years of incessant preaching in London. There were understandable reasons why England did not want to identify either itself with Assyria, a ferociously ungodly world-imperial power, or its monarchy with Sennacherib. But the main reason why the English nation was given a Jewish rather than gentile identity was theological. Significantly it was a Lutheran (anticipating 'Arminian' doctrine) who taught that Jonah's preaching in Nineveh demonstrated that God would not have one nation or peopie, but all men to be saved.#31 The Calvinism which dominated the English Church after the mid-sixteenth century retreated from universalism. By stressing and elaborating the doctrine of exclusive election and the correlative principle of covenant, Calvinism tended to restrict the divine plan of salvation to a single nation or people, Israel.

But what was Israel? And when in Hosea God threatened to cast Israel aside and yet to save Judah, or his children, what did this signify for protestant Englishmen? Whom did he intend to destroy, whom to redeem? And when God spoke of destruction, did he really mean it? Would the faithful few rescue the rest, or on the contrary would the corrupt nation pull down to destruction even the godly remnant within it? And what was destruction? Were the preachers talking about temporal judgments, the famines, plagues and wars which had been visited upon Israel, and which were the only judgments which could be experienced by entire nations? These would befall just and unjust. No one could escape, however godly. A preacher who taught otherwise, that those who died of the plague in London in 1604 were deficient in faith, spent the next two years in prison for the dangerous infamy of his doctrine.#32 Or did judgment mean hellfire, which Elizabethan and Jacobean preachers seldom mentioned? And what was it to be saved? To be preserved from invasion and conquest, as England had been in 1588, or to be assured of ultimate security beyond the grave, the salvation procured through Christ for his elect of which pious English Calvinists spoke with keen expectation when writing their wills and preparing themselves for death?

Attempts have been made to read consistency and coherence into English protestant discourse on these perplexing themes, but they have not been very successful. Making use of a distinction which by the early seventeenth century was standard, between the covenant of works made by God with Adam and ratified by Moses with the Jews, and the covenant of grace binding God to his elect children in Christ, it has been suggested that the argument of the fullest English exposition of Hosea, by John Downame, was that God had a covenant of works with the English nation which was distinct from his covenant of grace with the elect within all nations. But since man could not fulfil the terms of that covenant its eventual outcome could only be judgment and death upon the nation, leaving the elect to be saved not by their good works but through a free covenant of grace, available only to them. However, whether or not this was Downame's meaning, it was far from constituting the consistent message of English protestant divinity.#33

Preaching in 1593 to a congregation of businessmen drawn from the largest trading towns in the country, the famous William Perkins tackled the most chillingly apocalyptic and threatening of all the minor prophets, Zephaniah, who addressed Israel as 'O nation, not worthy to be loved'. In rehearsing the English nation's long apostasy ('ignorance after five and thirty years' preaching is counted no sin, . . . vain and customable swearing, mocking of religion and the professors thereof no sin') Perkins put the question: 'And is Israel only a nation not worthy to be beloved? Nay, I may cry out with as good a cause, O England, a nation not worthy to be beloved.' For God had poured out the same mercies and far greater upon as, and his kindness had been requited with an even greater measure of unkindness. But who was 'us'? Perkins at first seemed to be calling for repentance from the nation which had been so favoured. 'So may England prevent God's judgments.' But as he warmed to his theme this began to look less certain. The manner of God's judgment was expounded in the terms of Zephaniah's metaphor of the winnowing of so many heaps of corn, representing the 'several nations'. But these heaps, 'that is the particular churches', were full of hypocrites which God's powerful fan would winnow out. One of God's fans, or winds, blew after this life, finally separating the wicked from the elect. Another was the word preached, separating those it saved from the reprobate it merely condemned, leaving them without excuse. The third was the fan of immediate, temporal judgment: 'the wind of his wrath'. This was evidently equivalent to the 'natural' disasters of famine, plague and war. Now the English Church was 'doubtless' God's cornfield, 'a good heap of God's corn'. Those who taught otherwise, the Separatists, Perkins dismissed with scorn. But 'alas, the pure wheat, how thin it is

scattered!' God would have to winnow hard to find it. 'He will not cease to blow all the chaff to hell to find out those few corns of wheat, to lay them up in heaven, so that out of question, England being so full of chaff must look to be winnowed.'#34

The conclusion seemed to be that the godly, 'us', were to search their own hearts, fanning themselves, if they wished to avoid a share in the dire fate of national judgment. For as another preacher put it, the effect of repentance by a 'competent number' might be to tie the hands of God, at least for a time.#35 Then indeed, said Perkins, the 'glorious prosperity of England' might continue 'from generation to generation'. But if judgment could not be averted and this kingdom, 'this glorious nation', were to be brought to 'some miserable ruin', that would be God's way of sifting the corn from the chaff. So, by the end of his sermon, it appeared that Perkins was preaching to the converted, appealing realistically enough to his hearers, not to those beyond the sound of his voice and indifferent to it. 'Let us all be Noahs, Daniels and Jobs in our generations. If we do thus, then when judgment come we shall either turn them away from our nation, or at the least we shall deliver our own souls.' A London preacher envisaged the future with the same ambivalence: 'Either the Church visible shall recover its former glory and beauty, or at least the elect shall hereby be bettered and furnished to perfection'.#36

It would be wrong to classify such doctrine as the voice of an extreme and sectarian puritan fringe. Thomas Jackson, prebendary of Canterbury and lecturer in the cathedral, was a successful Jacobean preacher and although he was a disciple and even a convert of Perkins he was too much of an establishment figure, too ambivalent in his churchmanship, to be usefully identified as a Puritan. Indeed he openly censured 'schismatics', both the Separatists and 'others that make a division' with their pleas for 'parity, the mother of confusion and anarchy'. It was typical of such a lifelong 'moderate' that he should not know which side to choose at the outbreak of the Civil War. Yet in his Canterbury sermons *Judah must into captivitie* (1622) he was every bit as drastic in his judgmental, prophetic preaching as Perkins. His text was Jeremiah 7:16, 'Therefore, pray not for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee'. Jeremiah was actually forbidden to prevent Judah's impending calamity by his preaching. Admittedly many of God's threatenings were conditional. But this, like the destruction of Sodom, would prove to be an absolute sentence. 'The Lord grew to be resolute.' But until that moment when the godly would share in the generality of God's destructive temporal judgment they stood in the gate, proclaiming God's message and, they hoped, turning away his wrath (Jeremiah 7:2). Like Perkins and Cooper, Jackson taught that even if the godly eventually shared in the forthcoming catastrophe, they would at least save their own souls. 'How ever things go, it shall be well with the just . . . Pray, pray, pray, you shall at the least deliver your own souls.'#37

It has been said that some preachers 'practised the craft of suspense'. #38 The Kentish corn merchant who travelled back to Canterbury after hearing Perkins at Stourbridge Fair was perhaps impressed, even persuaded, by the metaphor of the goodly heap of corn which, like the New Testament parables, was close to his own experience. He knew what to do about his own soul, and perhaps what to hope for himself and for those like him. But as to the prospects for his neighbours and his country (Kent and the nation) he may have been troubled and confused. Apparently the best means to perpetuate the peace and prosperity of England was for godly persons like himself to draw apart, like Noah in an earlier day of impending wrath. Should he begin to build an ark in his own backyard, to join in some little separated conventicle, rather than continue to sit with his ungodly neighbours in his familiar seat in his parish church? No, for that would be to deny that England was 'a good heap of God's corn'. But it was a heap in which he was made to feel increasingly uncomfortable, the chaff as it were getting between his collar and his neck and up his nose. Forty years later his son would ask himself whether Noah's ark was not located on some distant Ararat in America. John White, the 'patriarch' of Dorchester and a great promoter of the New England enterprise, put the question in 1629 and circulated it widely: 'All other churches of Europe being brought to desolation, it cannot be but that the like judgment is coming to us, and who knoweth but that God hath prepared this place for a refuge for many whom he meaneth to save in the general destruction?' Thomas Shepard, an Essex minister, 'saw the Lord departing from England when Mr Hooker and Mr Cotton were gone'.#39

And so the idea of the elect nation, God's Israel, once a means of consolidating the Protestant Nation, now threatened to distract and divide it. Foxe had written of God placing 'us Englishmen here in one commonwealth, also in one Church, as in one ship together'. That sense of being in the same boat had been strengthened by the long Elizabethan crisis. In 1586, the year of the Babington Plot, even the notion that God's people was a small remnant was deployed as an argument for national unity in adversity. In a book called *A mirror for the multitude* the patriotic publicist John Norden warned against the spiritual danger of agreeing with the many on the broad way that leads to destruction, which was 'both weak and wicked'. 'Take heed therefore, be warned, let not custom or the multitude make you fain to follow their folly.' It was commonly the case that 'the most part' were alienated from the truth. Only 'the lesser number' were true servants of the living God. 'From the beginning, the Church of God hath been from the least part of the world, the least part of every country and kingdom, the least part of every city, yea the least part of every congregation.' With other, puritan, writers this theme would have been explored with critical introversion, to condemn the false and hypocritical religion of the mass of nominally protestant Englishmen. This indeed served as a sub-text even for Norden, who used some of his space to complain of 'dissembling Christians', 'key-cold or neuters'. 'Let us not deceive or flatter ourselves with a foolish conceit of being Christians when in deed our conversation differeth far from the doctrine of Christ.'

But in the main thrust of his argument Norden was extrovert, identifying 'the little flock of true Christians' with the embattled protestant nation, 'little England'; the impious multitude with its enemies, and in effect with the swaggering pride of international popery, 'the brags, boastings and thundering vaunts of *Senacherib* of Rome'. With England cast as the diminutive hero, Norden embarked on a spirited rehearsal of the story of David and Goliath:

> There was no comparison between the great *Golyah* and little *David* to the eyes of those that saw them both march towardes the combat. For natural reason could not have judged the victory to go with *David* for that, that in respect of his stature and person, there was no more equality than between a little mouse and a great elephant, and as their persons and strengths were far unlike, so were their weapons and external instruments of war, for the strong man had far the greater odds, for he was armed for the purpose with spear and shield, and poor *David* was naked, only a sling in his hand, wherewith (yet such was God's providence) with a stone he killed this huge and mighty monster, who vaunting of his own strength, blasphemed the God of Heaven, in whose miraculous death the power of GOD and his hatred against man's trust and confidence in the strength of flesh and blood was showed: to the comfort of the godly and confusion of the wicked.

'Thus may we, little Israel of England, say If the Lord had not been on our side when men rose up against us, they had swallowed us up quick.' This was written two years before the Armada sailed. But already it was forseen that the 'mighty monarch of Spain' that 'seemeth to rule' was himself overruled.#40

This was rousing, patriotic and uniting. But in the increasingly divisive religious discourse of the ensuing decades, the ungodly multitude was represented as the bulk of the English nation itself, the faithful remnant as Perkins's 'few corns of wheat' in a heap of chaff.

Thomas Cooper reminded his London congregation that Christ had spoken of a ‘little flock’. ‘Oh how vain is their conceit, that dream all shall be saved . . . The number of his chosen is a little flock in comparison of the *cast-aways*.’#41 In November 1640 the Kentish Member of Parliament Sir Edward Dering was exhorted by a zealous correspondent to ‘fight it out against the Goliaths of these times’. These ‘Goliaths’ were no longer a foreign enemy, the Spaniards, but the bishops of the Church of England.#42

The notion that England was united in godliness, a truly protestant nation, had always been somewhat specious. Quite apart from that other considerable minority of popish recusants who stayed away from their parish churches and were debarred from active participation in the affairs of the commonwealth, a body shading into an immeasurable but certainly substantial number of so-called ‘church papists’, one can only assume that most Englishmen were carried along more or less passively by the public mood of protestant embattlement, making no active contribution to it. The Elizabethan régime was narrowly based and unrepresentative (more so than the entrenched ‘majority’ in modern Ulster) and even if it claimed a kind of mass support as part of its legitimation it was not in reality indebted to the masses for very much.

By the end of the century preachers like Perkins were abandoning all pretence. Perkins, who died in 1602, did not presume to know when God’s wind would blow, or from which direction, or what form it would take. He did not know that it would blow a hurricane forty years later, in civil war. But a generation later the sense of apprehension was more sharply focused. When people asked the Suffolk minister John Carter whether they were to expect popery again, he would reply: ‘You shall not need to fear fire and faggot any more: but such dreadful divisions will be amongst God’s people and professors as will equalize the greatest persecutions.’°’ It was an accurate prophecy, perhaps because it was recorded some time after the prophesied events had happened. And by that time the forms had begun to assume shape and substance not of one Protestant Nation but of two, or at least of a permanently divided nation.